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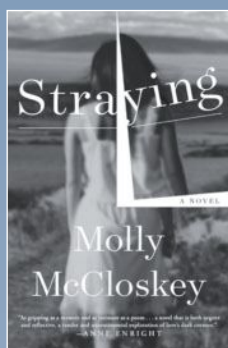
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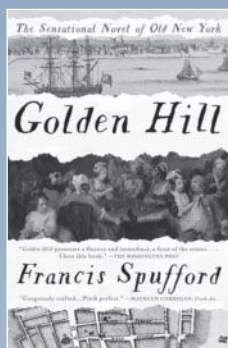
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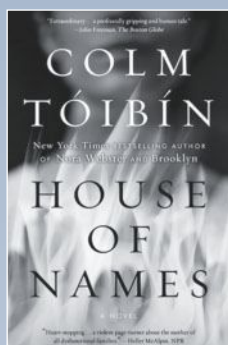
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# CONTRIBUTORS

**Kathryn Schulz** (*"Home Invasion,"* p. 32), a staff writer, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

**Joseph O'Neill** (*Fiction,* p. 66) is the author of the story collection "Good Trouble," which comes out in June.

**Jenny Kroik** (*Cover*) will exhibit a collection of paintings of bookstores at Word Up Community Bookshop in Manhattan in June. This is her second cover for *The New Yorker*.

**Rick Barot** (*Poem,* p. 68) is the author of three poetry collections, most recently "Chord." He directs the Rainier Writing Workshop in Tacoma, Washington.

**Emily Nussbaum** (*On Television,* p. 82), the magazine's television critic, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

**Adam Gopnik** (*Books,* p. 72), a staff writer, has been contributing to the magazine since 1986. His most recent book is "At the Strangers' Gate: Arrivals in New York."

**Jane Mayer** (*"The Man Behind the Dossier,"* p. 48), a staff writer, is the author of "Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right."

**Hilton Als** (*The Theatre,* p. 84), the magazine's theatre critic, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is an associate professor of writing at Columbia.

**Jiayang Fan** (*"The Spreading Vine,"* p. 42) became a staff writer in 2016. Her reporting on China, American politics, and culture has appeared in the magazine and on newyorker.com since 2010.

**Alex Watt** (*Shouts & Murmurs,* p. 41) has written for newyorker.com, CollegeHumor, and McSweeney's.

**Sarah Larson** (*The Talk of the Town,* p. 28) writes about pop culture, including a weekly column on podcasts, for newyorker.com.

**Alex Ross** (*Musical Events,* p. 78), a staff writer, is the author of "The Rest Is Noise" and "Listen to This."

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### THE WRITER'S VOICE

On this week's episode, Joseph O'Neill reads his short story "The Poltroon Husband."



### VIDEO

In the début of "The New Yorker Interview," Masha Gessen and David Remnick discuss Russia and Trump.

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RIGHT: NICOLE CONFLETTI



# THE MAIL

## CROSSING THE ANTARCTIC

I read with pleasure David Grann's account of Henry Worsley's solo trek across the Antarctic continent ("The White Darkness," February 12th & 19th). I share his great appreciation for Ernest Shackleton, whose hut at Cape Royds I visited, after sledding across the sea ice from Scott Base, more than fifty years ago. Because Shackleton had wintered there, it has since been carefully preserved. I spent the night in the hut, then crossed through a penguin colony on my way back to Scott Base, and then travelled to the Victory Mountains. Recently, in Heathrow Airport, I saw some crates of "Shackleton" whiskey for sale. Curious, I did some research, and I've since learned that three crates of Mackinlay's had been buried beneath the floorboards of Shackleton's hut, around 1908, and that I had slept on top of them. My respect for Sir Ernest notwithstanding, if I had known that such a stash was at my feet it is highly unlikely that those commemorative crates would have still been peddled all those years later at Heathrow.

*John E. S. Lawrence*  
New York City

I was moved and troubled by Grann's article on Worsley. As did the explorer, I, too, love Shackleton, but what strikes me most about Worsley's last trek is that he drove himself to death by lacking the very things his hero was most revered for. Shackleton proved his leadership when he was tethered to a community for whom he was responsible. Having cut his own tether to others, Worsley had only his indomitable will to guide him. It was the fierceness and even myopia of that will that allowed him to ignore the signs that his body was indeed failing, until it was too late. "Mind over matter" can in these instances be the greatest threat of all.

*Jennifer Greer Dignazio*  
Cambridge, Mass.

Grann's article on Worsley's many treks across the Antarctic in emulation of Shackleton was fascinating. I grew up feeding my soul on the testosterone-

fuelled stories of Man vs. Nature, Hero vs. Fate. And then I grew up. Why do we still idealize such masochistic, obsessive, and—sorry to say it—stupid behavior? What is heroic about an older man who goes out alone to cross the frozen wilderness knowing the physical toll such a trek will take on his body, a price he'd barely been able to pay when he was younger and healthier? He was awarded the Polar Medal as one of the world's great polar explorers, but what discoveries did he make? What did he learn that well-planned and supported scientific programs were not already accomplishing? Heroism and leadership when in the line of fire are one thing—Worsley was obviously skilled and admirable as a commander—but seeking out death, just for the "challenge," isn't admirable. This is the type of "heroic" behavior that becomes mythologized instead of being recognized as an expression of a damaged psyche.

*Robert Fleet*  
Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.

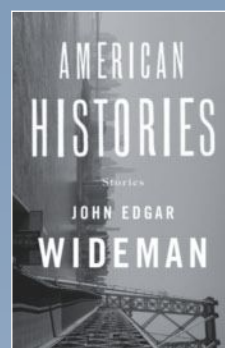
## IN DEFENSE OF HEIDEGGER

Thomas Meaney's profile of Peter Sloterdijk refers to the philosopher's intellectual debt to "right-wing thinkers such as Martin Heidegger" (February 26th). I'm no expert, but I doubt that Heidegger can be so easily dispatched. I appreciate *The New Yorker's* effort to characterize an influential contemporary philosopher like Sloterdijk and to call Heidegger out for his despicable political associations. Yet Heidegger's ideas remain provocative if you give them their due. If you want to understand what is going on when someone gives you bad vibes, or why that couch just doesn't work in that corner, Heidegger might be able to help. Sometimes, a loaded term like "right-wing" can be needlessly reductive.

*Andrew Schwartz*  
Walla Walla, Wash.

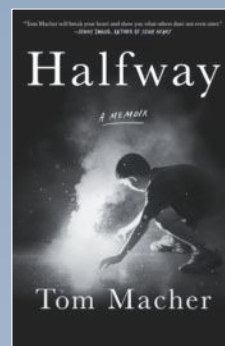
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# ...AND SHOW THE WORLD ANEW.



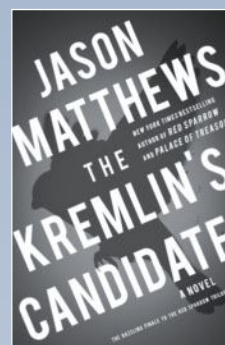
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REFLECTIONS FROM  
THE DRESSING ROOM  
of *The Band's Visit* star  
KATRINA LENK

# How I've Been Thinking About This Musical

If a traditional musical is a novel,  
then *The Band's Visit* is more of a poem.

I don't mean, "Well, well. Look at us and our beautiful poem." I mean, when asked, it's hard to talk about *The Band's Visit* like you might talk about other shows. Yes, there's a plot. There are love stories. There are dance numbers. There's even roller skating. But then there's something else.

For me, thinking about the show as a poem helps that "something else" make more sense. You can come to it with different expectations. You can look at it for what it is and how it makes you feel. And poems always have new things to understand, which has been my experience with our production.

I've been fascinated to hear how audiences interpret the show as well. One person said he thought it was a story of missed connections. Others said they thought it was bittersweet or mature or hopeful in the way it talks about relationships. It's like a poem in that way, because you can put your own experiences into what you're seeing.

And in a poem, the ending isn't always the ending. A poem asks you to keep thinking, keep feeling, and I see that in *The Band's Visit*. The ending is complicated. It's asking us questions. "Maybe you didn't get what you thought you wanted, but what do you have that's even bigger than that? Is something open that was closed? Did you feel something you didn't think you could feel? Are you feeling it again?"

I don't exactly know how to answer these questions, but I know they're in the show. I know I want to keep thinking about them.

(As told to Mark Blankenship at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre)

"FEELS AS ESSENTIAL AS OXYGEN."  
- Ben Brantley, *The New York Times*

"FEELS LIKE AN INTOXICATING DESERT KISS."  
- David Rooney, *The Hollywood Reporter*

"FEELS SOULFUL AND BEAUTIFUL."  
- Peter Marks, *The Washington Post*

"FEELS LIKE NOTHING YOU WOULD EXPECT."  
- Tim Teeman, *The Daily Beast*

"FEELS OVERWHELMINGLY JOYOUS."  
- Joe Dziemianowicz, *New York Daily News*

"FEELS LIKE BALM FOR OUR SOULS"  
- Charles McNulty, *Los Angeles Times*

"FEELS SWEETLY HOPEFUL."  
- Terry Teachout, *The Wall Street Journal*

"FEELS LIKE A DREAM."  
- Jeremy Gerard, *Deadline*

"FEELS FRESH, HAPPY AND EXOTIC"  
- Reed, *The Observer*

"FEELS LIKE A SINGLY BEAUTIFUL DREAM."  
- Roma Torre, *NPR*

"FEELS UTTERLY BEAUTIFUL."  
- Sara Holdren, *New York Magazine*

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SPRING PREVIEW



MARCH 7 – 13, 2018

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



If there's a Mozart opera in need of updating at the Met, it's "***Così Fan Tutte***," which since 1996 has been presented in a gentle and sunny production that largely ignores the show's complex musings on men, women, power, and society. The new staging, by Phelim McDermott (opening on March 15), evokes Coney Island in the nineteen-fifties, with a troupe of carnival performers backing a cast that includes the radiant comedienne Kelli O'Hara (pictured above), who sings—in Italian—the cutup role of Despina.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC



## THE THEATRE



Coming to Broadway this spring: *Harry Potter*, Eliza Doolittle of *My Fair Lady*, and, in a revival of *The Iceman Cometh*, Denzel Washington.

The British director-and-choreographer team John Tiffany and Steven Hoggett burst out of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2006, with *Black Watch*, which made a Scottish infantry regiment soar and glide. Since then, they've brought their movement-based aesthetic to Broadway, in shows like *Once* and *The Glass Menagerie*. Actors don't stay still on their stages: they whirl and grasp and float. You might call Tiffany and Hoggett theatrical wizards, especially if you've been tipped off to their latest project: the mammoth staging of **"Harry Potter and the Cursed Child,"** starting previews on March 16. The London production of Jack Thorne's two-part play caused a sensation, like all things Potter, and the New York version is poised to do the same. Broadway's biggest theatre, the Lyric (it housed *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*), has undergone a costly renovation to accommodate Tiffany's staging. The story, devised by Tiffany and Thorne with J. K. Rowling, catches up with the boy wizard nineteen years after *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, with the hero's son on his way to Hogwarts.

Most of the theatre season deals with lives of mere Muggles. Bartlett Sher follows up his sweeping revivals of *South Pacific* and *The King and I* with another classic musical at Lincoln Center, **"My Fair Lady"** (starting previews March 15, at the Vivian Beaumont). Lauren Ambrose (*Six Feet Under*) plays the urchin turned gentlewoman Eliza Doolittle, with Harry Hadden-Paton as Henry Higgins. Joshua Jackson and Lauren Ridloff play a teacher and a deaf maid who forge a troubled romance in **"Children of a Lesser God,"** the 1979 Mark Medoff drama (March 22, Studio 54). An old man remembers (or misremembers) his encounters with Joyce and Lenin in **"Travesties,"** Tom Stoppard's 1974 comedy, a Roundabout transfer from London's Menier Chocolate Factory (March 29, American Airlines Theatre). Jim Parsons, Zachary Quinto, Matt Bomer, and Andrew Rannells star in Joe Mantello's fiftieth-anniversary revival of **"The Boys in the Band,"** Mart Crowley's seminal gay drama (April 30, Booth). In not-quite-Muggle territory, Condola Rashad headlines Manhattan Theatre Club's revival

of George Bernard Shaw's **"Saint Joan"** (April 3, Samuel J. Friedman).

Denzel Washington—another superhuman, at least when it comes to star quality—lands on Broadway in Eugene O'Neill's **"The Iceman Cometh,"** directed by George C. Wolfe (March 22, Jacobs). Audiences will have their pick of O'Neill masterpieces, with the Brooklyn Academy of Music importing Richard Eyre's production of **"Long Day's Journey Into Night,"** with Lesley Manville (*Phantom Thread*) and Jeremy Irons (May 8, BAM's Harvey Theatre). Other Off Broadway attractions include **"Mlima's Tale,"** by Lynn Nottage (*Sweat*), which follows an elephant trapped in the ivory trade (March 27, Public). Rachel Chavkin directs **"Light Shining in Buckinghamshire,"** Caryl Churchill's drama of English political identity, circa 1647 (April 18, New York Theatre Workshop). And Nikos Karathanos stages a new adaptation of Aristophanes' **"The Birds,"** in which men and birds join forces to build a utopia in the sky (May 2, St. Ann's Warehouse). Sounds fun. Quidditch, anyone?

—Michael Schulman



## OPENINGS &amp; PREVIEWS

**Admissions**

In this new play by Joshua Harmon ("Significant Other"), Jessica Hecht is an admissions director at a private academy who is diversifying the student body while her own son applies to Ivy League colleges. Daniel Aukin directs. (*Mitzi E. Newhouse*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens March 12.)

**Angels in America**

Andrew Garfield, Nathan Lane, and Lee Pace star in the National Theatre's revival of Tony Kushner's epic two-part drama about New Yorkers living through the nineteen-eighties AIDS epidemic. Directed by Marianne Elliott. (*Neil Simon*, 250 W. 52nd St. 877-250-2929. In previews.)

**Bobbie Clearly**

In Alex Lubischer's comedy, directed by Will Davis for Roundabout Underground, the residents of a Nebraska town tell the story of a murder in a cornfield two years earlier. (*Black Box*, *Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre*, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. Previews begin March 8.)

**Carousel**

Jack O'Brien directs a revival of the classic Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, starring Joshua Henry, Jessie Mueller, and Renée Fleming. (*Imperial*, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

**The Fall**

South Africa's Baxter Theatre Center at the University of Cape Town presents this piece, recounting the actors' experiences as student activists calling for the removal of a colonialist monument. (*St. Ann's Warehouse*, 45 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779. Previews begin March 8. Opens March 12.)

**Good for Otto**

Ed Harris, Rhea Perlman, and F. Murray Abraham star in David Rabe's play, directed by Scott Elliott for the New Group and set in an overburdened mental-health center in Connecticut. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. In previews. Opens March 8.)

**Harry Clarke**

A return engagement of David Cale's one-man play, produced by Audible and starring Billy Crudup as a Midwestern man who poses as a Londoner. Directed by Leigh Silverman. (*Minetta Lane Theatre*, 18 Minetta Lane. 800-745-3000. In previews.)

**Hello, from the Children of Planet Earth**

The Playwrights Realm stages Don Nguyen's comedy, in which a lesbian couple trying to have a baby ask a friend who works at NASA to be their sperm donor. (*The Duke on 42nd Street*, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. Opens March 7.)

**Lobby Hero**

Second Stage reopens its new Broadway home with Trip Cullman's revival of Kenneth Lonergan's 2001 play about a murder investigation in a Manhattan apartment building, starring Michael Cera and Chris Evans. (*Helen Hayes*, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

**The Low Road**

Bruce Norris ("Clybourne Park") draws on everything from Henry Fielding to Monty Python in this historical parable about the roots of free-market capitalism. Michael Greif directs. (*Public*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Opens March 7.)

**Mean Girls**

This musical version of the teen comedy has songs by Jeff Richmond and Nell Benjamin, direction by Casey Nicholaw, and a book by Tina Fey, who updated her 2004 screenplay. (*August Wilson*, 245 W. 52nd St. 877-250-2929. Previews begin March 12.)

**Old Stock: A Refugee Love Story**

Hannah Moscovitch, Ben Caplan, and Christian Barry created this klezmer-infused folktale, based on the true story of a pair of Jewish Romanian refugees who fled to Canada in 1908. (*59E59*, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Previews begin March 8.)

**Three Tall Women**

Glenda Jackson, Laurie Metcalf, and Alison Pill play the same woman at different ages in Edward Albee's play, which won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Joe Mantello directs. (*Golden*, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

**Three Wise Guys**

The Actors Company Theatre ends its final season with Scott Alan Evans and Jeffrey Couchman's comedy, based on two stories by Damon Runyon and set in a speakeasy on Christmas Eve, 1932. (*Beckett*, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens March 11.)

**The Winter's Tale**

Theatre for a New Audience presents Shakespeare's tale of jealousy and enchantment, directed by Arin Arbus. (*Polonsky Shakespeare Center*, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. Previews begin March 13.)

## NOW PLAYING

**The Amateurs**

In this play by Jordan Harrison ("Marjorie Prime"), a company of itinerant actors tries to stay a step ahead of the plague. As if this weren't hard enough, they all harbor secrets. Two of the men had an affair, and after one dies the other reveals telling marks on his own body. Lest you draw any hasty conclusions, the show is set in the fourteenth century and the plague is the real, bubonic deal. Then again, it is, indeed, a metaphor. To make sure we really get it, Harrison (portrayed by Michael Cyril Creighton) steps in to tell us about his coming out in the nineteen-nineties. The cast simmers at a low boil under Oliver Butler's direction, and it's hard to shake the feeling that the production's main directive seems to be: when in doubt, make something obvious even more so. (*Vineyard*, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303.)

**Amy and the Orphans**

Three adult siblings, one of whom has Down syndrome, reunite to bury their father. Familial drama, bereavement, and a chromosomal disorder don't seem like grist for comedy, and yet the zingers threaded through Lindsey Ferrentino's emotionally heavy script, based loosely on her own family history, are what save it from spooling out into sentimentality. Some of the most powerfully delivered lines are borrowed from the world of cinema; Amy (played with panache by Jamie Brewer, an actress with Down syndrome) is something of a connoisseur, and her speech is peppered with quotes from her favorite films ("Yippee-ki-yay, motherfucker!"). On Brewer's nights off, the role is taken up by Edward Barbanell, another actor with Down syndrome, and the show (directed by Scott Ellis for the Round-

about) runs under the title "Andy and the Orphans." (*Laura Pels*, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

**Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo: Homelife & The Zoo Story**

Don't talk to strangers. Or to intimates. Or to anyone at all. In Albee's paired one-acts, Peter (Robert Sean Leonard), a foggyish publisher of boring, important textbooks, is enticed into two painful conversations, first with Ann (Katie Finneran), his wife, then with Jerry (Paul Sparks), a man he meets at the park. Ann, who longs for more excitement in their marriage, wants to know if she and Peter can "become animals." Jerry tells Peter, "You're an animal, too." Of course, it's human self-consciousness—the thing that separates us from animals—and the impossibility of overcoming it that give these plays their humor and sorrow and horror. Andrew Lieberman's set—a few pieces of furniture splayed against the stage's wide expanse—skews abstract, but Lila Neugebauer's sensitively directed and finely acted production grounds the work in everyday behavior and real feeling. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

**Flight**

Created by the Scottish company Vox Motus and based on a novel by Caroline Brothers, this unclassifiable experience narrates the attempt of two young brothers to escape from Kabul to London. The presentation is profoundly imaginative: each audience member sits in a private booth around a black carousel that conveys a succession of hundreds of gorgeously designed miniature dioramas, which, in sequence, tell the story of the boys' two-year journey. Each vignette is a still-life, but an immersive soundtrack of dialogue, narration, music, and effects, delivered by headphones, fully animates the scenes. You could call it theatre, or art installation, or some mad hybrid of comic book, peepshow, and radio play; one spectator was overheard describing it as "analog virtual reality." No matter the name, it's unforgettable in both content and form, a devastating concatenation of dreams and nightmares on the run. (*The Heath at the McKittrick Hotel*, 542 W. 27th St. 212-564-1662.)

**Is God Is**

Aleshea Harris's ninety-minute work owes so much to the influence of Suzan-Lori Parks that it's difficult to discern what Harris's actual gifts are. But she is talented, and this female version of the Cain-and-Abel story, told through spaghetti Westerns and other revenge-fantasy genres, is technically absorbing but tonally distracting: we want to know who Harris is as an artist, rather than revisit the artists she's loved. The director, Taibi Magar, does a fantastic job of moving along the story (helped by the set designer, Adam Rigg), which follows Racine and Anaia (Dame-Jasmine Hughes and Alfie Fuller, both excellent), twin sisters who are set on a murderous mission by She (Jessica Frances Dukes), their mother, who has let so much destruction happen because of her bitterness about love. Dukes's characterization is defined, for the most part, by her voice, and she's brilliant. (*SoHo Rep*, 46 Walker St. 866-811-4111.)

**An Ordinary Muslim**

Born in Britain to parents who emigrated from South Asia, and the most bitterly argumentative member of an endlessly quarrelsome family, Azeem Bhatti (Sanjit De Silva) feels that he has no true home in the world. That sense

is heightened to the point of crisis after he applies unsuccessfully for a management position at the bank where he works. Directed by Jo Bonney, Hammaad Chaudry's debut play resembles a Muslim variation on the "angry young man" literature that emerged from the U.K. in the nineteen-fifties. While the religious specifics of the story lend it a fresh veneer, the generational and class dynamics that Chaudry is exploring feel by now like shopworn tropes; this is too much an "issue" play to allow its characters and incidents enough idiosyncrasy to truly surprise. (*New York Theatre Workshop*, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475.)

#### Relevance

Empty and unfunny, JC Lee's play, directed by Liesl Tommy at MCC Theatre, unfurls during an academic conference. In the first scene, Dr. Theresa Hanneck (Jayne Houdyshell), a second-waver in chunky jewelry, keeps talking over her fellow-panelist, Msemaji Ukweli (Pascale Armand), an Instagram-ready identity-politics type. The conversation turns ugly. Social media makes it uglier. So Theresa uses her keynote address as a way to unmask her rival, in a speech that grows increasingly ludicrous. Though Theresa calls for a genuine clash of ideas, she doesn't really want one. Neither does Lee, who gives everyone a couple of talking points but nothing resembling a coherent argument. Each woman, including the cat-obsessed moderator (Molly Camp), is shown to be backbiting and craven. The sole man, Theresa's longtime agent and former lover (Richard Masur), behaves most honorably. This is no-wave feminism. (*Lucille Lortel*, 121 Christopher St. 866-811-4111. Through March 11.)

#### Terminus

In a rural town in Georgia, in a run-down house near the railroad tracks, Eller (Deirdre O'Connell)—sixty-five, unsure, mightily distracted, and feisty as hell—lives alone with her grandson, Jaybo (Reynaldo Piniella). Alone, that is, if you don't count the ghosts who emerge regularly from the doorways, the stove, and the fridge, with whom Eller is as passionately engaged as she is with her concerned grandson. The playwright, Gabriel Jason Dean, creates some theatrical magic by layering these alternate realities, with the help of clear direction from Lucie Tiberghien. A budding romance between Jaybo and Finch (Vanessa Butler), a self-described "hobo," is an unfortunate detour from the central themes of family, race, history, and guilt. But O'Connell powerfully embodies Eller's mortal struggle, and, not incidentally, nails every laugh line along the way. (*Fourth Street Theatre*, 83 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475. Through March 10.)

#### ALSO NOTABLE

**The Band's Visit** Ethel Barrymore. • **Black Light** Joe's Pub. (Reviewed in this issue.) • **Bright Colors and Bold Patterns** SoHo Playhouse. Through March 11. • **Escape to Margaritaville** Marquis. • **Farinelli and the King** Belasco. • **Frozen** St. James. • **Hangmen** Atlantic Theatre Company. • **Hello, Dolly!** Shubert. • **In the Body of the World** City Center Stage I. • **Jerry Springer—The Opera** Pershing Square Signature Center. (Reviewed in this issue.) • **Kings** Public. • **Once on This Island** Circle in the Square. • **The Parisian Woman** Hudson. Through March 11. • **SpongeBob SquarePants** Palace. • **Springsteen on Broadway** Walter Kerr.





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## MOVIES



Original styles are on view in new films by Wes Anderson, Lucrecia Martel, and Aaron Katz.

For his second animated feature, **"Isle of Dogs"** (opening March 23), Wes Anderson employs the same stop-motion techniques, featuring elaborately crafted puppets and diorama-like sets, that he used for **"Fantastic Mr. Fox."** This time, he deploys a vast array of characters, both human and canine, to dramatize grand-scale dystopian politics with comedic verve. The film is set in a futuristic Japan, where Megasaki City's tyrannical Mayor Kobayashi (voiced by Kunichi Nomura) orders that all dogs be deported to a wasteland called Trash Island. The mayor's twelve-year-old ward, Atari (Koyu Rankin), sneaks off to the compound to

rescue his own dog, Spots (Liev Schreiber), and a well-organized uprising results. Voice performers include Greta Gerwig, Bill Murray, Edward Norton, Scarlett Johansson, and Courtney B. Vance. Chloé Zhao's drama **"The Rider"** (April 13) is based on the true story of—and also stars—the rodeo competitor Brady Jandreau, who plays a fictionalized version of himself. The story involves his struggle to remake his life after suffering a severe head injury that prevents him from riding. Jandreau's father, Tim, and his sister, Lilly, co-star. Michelle Pfeiffer takes the title role in Andrew Dosunmu's **"Where Is Kyra?"** (April 6),

playing a Brooklyn woman struggling to find work while living in her elderly mother's apartment. When her mother dies, Kyra takes desperate measures to keep a roof over her head. Kiefer Sutherland co-stars.

Steven Soderbergh, officially back to feature filmmaking after a brief retirement, is as prolific as ever; he shot his new movie, **"Unsane"** (March 23), on an iPhone. It's the story of an executive (played by Claire Foy) who believes that she is being stalked and is committed to a mental institution; the drama turns on whether her beliefs are real or hallucinations. Juno Temple, Amy Irving, and Jay Pharoah co-star. In **"Zama"** (April 13), Lucrecia Martel adapts the celebrated novel by Antonio Di Benedetto, set in colonial Argentina in the eighteenth century, to tell the story of a Spanish magistrate (Daniel Giménez Cacho) in a small seaside town who's doing the empire's bidding (overseeing slaves and fighting marauders) while pursuing his personal pleasures. Martel captures, with dramatic intensity and analytical insight, the intellectual background of power politics and the violent resistance that colonialism provokes. In the mystery **"Gemini"** (March 30), directed by Aaron Katz, Zoë Kravitz plays a Hollywood actress who is murdered, and Lola Kirke plays her personal assistant, who is suspected of the crime and tries to clear her name. It co-stars John Cho, Greta Lee, and Ricki Lake.

Kay Cannon directed **"Blockers"** (April 6), a comedy about a group of parents who intend to prevent their daughters from fulfilling a pact to lose their virginity on prom night. Leslie Mann, Ike Barinholtz, Kathryn Newton, Gideon Adlon, and Geraldine Viswanathan star. In the comedy **"Life of the Party"** (May 11), Melissa McCarthy plays a middle-aged woman who returns to college and becomes her daughter's classmate. McCarthy's husband, Ben Falcone, directed; Molly Gordon and Maya Rudolph co-star.

—Richard Brody



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MOVIES

## NOW PLAYING

### Annihilation

In this numbingly ludicrous science-fiction drama, written and directed by Alex Garland, a talented cast of actors play undeveloped characters delivering leaden dialogue in a haphazard story that's filmed with a bland slickness. Natalie Portman stars as Lena, a medical-school professor and former Army officer whose husband, Kane (Oscar Isaac), a soldier reported dead, turns up gravely ill. En route to a hospital, they are both spirited to a top-secret military facility, where Lena learns that Kane penetrated "the Shimmer," a strange rainbow curtain that surrounds a large seaside nature preserve, and she soon joins four other officers (Jennifer Jason Leigh, Tessa Thompson, Gina Rodriguez, and Tuva Novotny) on a mission to explore its mysteries. It turns out that it involves aliens and heavy-duty gene splicing; the five women confront some conveniently contrived personal issues while facing attacks from a random batch of monsters. Near the end of the film, however, a few elements of design, such as crystalline trees, reveal some inspiration, and a grand conflagration suggests the proximity of the ridiculous to the sublime.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

### Black Panther

Nothing in Ryan Coogler's previous features, "Fruitvale Station" (2013) and "Creed" (2015), prepared us for the scale of his latest enterprise. Each of those movies probed the experience of a single African-American in detail, and in situ, close to home, whereas the new story summons a fresh homeland altogether—the fictional African nation of Wakanda, which is rich in resources and mightily skilled at concealing them from the outside world. The throne has passed to a young monarch, T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), who, among his other virtues, is a superhero, donning a special suit to fend off those who threaten his country's peace. They include an arms dealer (Andy Serkis) who steals vibranium, the magical ore that is mined in Wakanda, and a warrior known as Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan), who deems himself more fit to rule than T'Challa. The whole saga marks a startling departure for the house of Marvel, not just in the actors of color who throng the screen but also in the compound of comic-book extravagance and utopian politics. For the most part, the mixture works. With Angela Bassett, Lupita Nyong'o, Forest Whitaker, and, as the king's younger sister, the spirited Letitia Wright.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 2/26/18.) (In wide release.)*

### Claire's Camera

The South Korean director Hong Sang-soo condenses a grand melodrama of work, love, and art into a brisk sixty-nine-minute roundelay of chance meetings and intimate confrontations. It's set amid—and was actually filmed at—the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, where a young Korean woman named Jeon Manhee (Kim Min-hee) is fired from her job as a film-sales assistant after a one-night stand with a director named So Wansoo (Jung Jin-young), who, unbeknownst to her, is the boyfriend of her boss, Nam Yanghye (Chang Mi-hee). Stuck in Cannes with nothing to do, Manhee befriends Claire (Isabelle Huppert), a teacher from Paris, who's there as a tourist. Claire wanders around with her Polaroid camera, taking pictures of everyone she meets—including Wansoo and Yanghye—and unintentionally sparking uncomfortable

reunions. Hong distills vast emotional crises and creative self-recognitions into confessional monologues, pugnacious discussions, and luminous aphorisms. His tightrope-long takes of scenes filmed in settings ranging from the picturesque to the banal (restaurants and apartments, café terraces, Mediterranean beaches) have an intricate dramatic construction, replete with glittering asides and wondrous coincidences, to rival that of a Hollywood classic. In English and Korean.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

### Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?

Travis Wilkerson's extraordinary first-person documentary—he directed, wrote, filmed, edited, narrated, recorded the sound, and even performed the score—is a bitterly revelatory work of history, a monstrous family story, and an unflinching view of current politics. He visits his mother's home town of Dothan, Alabama, to investigate an ugly bit of family lore: in 1946, his great-grandfather S. E. Branch, a grocer, who was white, killed a black man, Bill Spann, in the store, and faced no charges. Wilkerson's mother and one of his aunts offer reminiscences—awful ones—about Branch; another aunt, a pro-Confederacy activist, offers excuses. Wilkerson speaks with Ed Vaughn, a local civil-rights activist and retired politician, about the region's legacy of racism; he travels to nearby Abbeville, the site of the rape of Recy Taylor, a black woman, by six white men, in 1944, and traces Rosa Parks's work at the time to seek justice for her. Searching for Spann's grave, Wilkerson finds himself in Ku Klux Klan territory, where he meets a black official working in fear and experiences threats firsthand. As disclosures of past and present horrors mount, Wilkerson tints and superimposes images, suggesting their inadequacy at conveying the agonies, both historical and intimate, of enforced silences and erased lives.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

### Early Man

Nick Park's new exercise in stop-motion animation—the same technique that gave quivering and malleable life to Wallace and Gromit—yanks us back to the prehistoric age and thus, inevitably, to the dawn of soccer. A tranquil tribe whose sylvan way of life is interrupted by a gang of marauders (supposedly more advanced and without doubt more heavily armored) has to compete with them on the playing field for the right to inhabit the precious forest. The leader of the underdogs is Dug (voiced by Eddie Redmayne), and his opposition is Lord Nooth (Tom Hiddleston), who, for reasons best known to himself, sounds French. The gags, as ever, are strewn with generosity, and, since we are watching the work of Aardman Animations, the minutiae are handled with delectable care. The anachronisms, too, are of the best sort—that is to say, the most honestly unabashed. By the lofty standards that Park has set for himself, however, and which have been met time and again in his shorter films, the new adventure feels stretched out and lacking in comic compression; where, you wonder, is Gromit when we need him? With the voices of Maisie Williams, Miriam Margolyes, and Timothy Spall.—*A.L. (2/26/18) (In wide release.)*

### Game Night

What starts as a standard-issue romantic comedy, about a youngish suburban couple facing fertility issues, quickly morphs into a garishly overplotted and vainly clever action thriller.



Annie (Rachel McAdams) and Max (Jason Bateman) are parlor-game fanatics who host a weekly game night for friends. Max's rich and swaggering brother, Brooks (Kyle Chandler), shows up and insists on taking part—he hires a company to stage a kidnapping mystery that the friends will have to solve. But real-life kidnappers get hold of Brooks instead, and Max and Annie spearhead the effort to bring him home safely. The lively cast, which includes Kylie Bunbury, Lamorne Morris, Billy Magnussen, and Sharon Horgan, make the most of their frantic material, but each character is virtually pinned to the wall with his or her one defining trait; only a sentimental and socially awkward police officer (Jesse Plemons) displays any idiosyncrasy. The script, by Mark Perez, is a trove of pop-culture trivia and a rickety framework of contrivances; the directors, John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein, offer a few nimble gags, but the movie is a hollow throwback to classic comedy, and it shines only by contrast with dull studio competition.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

### The 15:17 to Paris

With wide-eyed wonder, Clint Eastwood tells the real-life story of three young American men who, in 2015, thwarted a terrorist attack aboard a train bound for Paris. His admiration and astonishment are embodied in his gonzo casting of the three men—Spencer Stone, Anthony Sadler, and Alek Skarlatos—as themselves. (All first-time actors, they perform with lively earnestness.) The attack takes only about ten minutes of screen time; most of the film traces their friendship, starting in middle school, in Sacramento, in 2005, when the three boys, disdained and angry, bond—and become obsessed with playing war. After some floundering, Spencer and Alek enter military service; Anthony goes to college. The three young men take a jaunty summer trip through Europe and, as if they've been training for it, they make history. Eastwood's film (written by Dorothy Blyskal) only masquerades as a drama; it's a thesis about the traits that forge the men's heroism. There's also a bit of politics—a view of social trends that foster or frustrate the men's best qualities—but it hardly figures into Eastwood's briskly ecstatic vision of the lives of secular saints.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

### Loveless

The new movie from Andrei Zvyagintsev, who made “The Return” (2003) and “Leviathan” (2014), is no less bleak than its precursors. Alyosha (Matvey Novikov), age twelve, is the only child of Zhenya (Maryana Spivak) and Boris (Aleksey Rozin), whose marriage is inches away from collapse. They all still live together, just about, in a Moscow apartment block, but each adult has a lover (Boris's girlfriend is pregnant), leaving no one around to love the boy. When he vanishes, it takes his parents a while to notice, and longer still to panic. The police are unable to help; as so often in Zvyagintsev's films, the state is at best incompetent and at worst oppressively corrupt. Instead, it is volunteers who start a search, and the camera prowls with them through empty woodlands and the husks of ruined buildings—a dank rebuke to the new existence, adorned with cell phones and exercise machines, that Zhenya covets. As in Antonioni's “L'Avventura” (1960), the plot feels at once gripping and open-ended, but that film's mood of cool mystery is supplanted here by an

atmosphere of hopelessness and spite. In Russian.—*A.L.* (2/12 & 19/18) (In limited release.)

### The Passion of Anna

In this unsung Ingmar Bergman masterpiece, from 1969, the Vietnam War unfolds on television and atrocities on the ground erupt from a serial animal killer. Bergman fills his favorite location, the remote Fårö island, with terrifying threats and acts, yet his filmmaking was never more alive. The performances and the staging have a risky, improvisatory edge; Bergman even cuts away to interviews with his four lead actors. And the quotidian beauty of Sven Nykvist's color cinematography anchors the volatile drama. Liv Ullmann plays Anna, a widow with one article of faith: she believes that her marriage was totally honest. Max von Sydow plays Andreas, a self-doubting recluse. As they become a couple, the movie juxtaposes Anna's forthright gaze with secrets Andreas learns about her, both from a letter by her late husband and through conversations with her friends and his neighbors, the proudly cynical Elis (Erland Josephson) and the sensual, unsteady Eva (Bibi Andersson). Ullmann makes you believe that Anna could be delusional—or a paragon of truth. Bergman asks whether anyone can retain a grasp on “reality” in the perilous circumstances of the modern and postmodern world.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum, March 2-3, and streaming.)

### Phantom Thread

The role taken by Daniel Day-Lewis in Paul Thomas Anderson's strange and sumptuous

film—the actor's final screen appearance, he has claimed—is, in every sense, tailor-made. He plays Reynolds Woodcock, a fashion designer of the nineteen-fifties, who, in the London house that he shares with his sister Cyril (Lesley Manville), creates immaculate dresses for a selection of wealthy women. As devout as a priest in his calling, he seems to resent any intrusion upon his professional peace, yet he invites a waitress named Alma (Vicky Krieps) into his life as a model, and, eventually, as far more. The result is a pact as perilous and as claustrophobic as that between the guru and his disciple in Anderson's “The Master” (2012), with the camera closing in remorselessly on stricken or adoring faces, and a strong tincture of sickness in the romantic atmosphere. All three leading players respond with rigor to this Hitchcockian intensity, and Reynolds—fussy, cold, and agonized—is a worthy addition to Day-Lewis's gallery of obsessives. The costumes, every bit as alluring as you would expect, are by Mark Bridges, and Jonny Greenwood contributes a swooning score.—*A.L.* (1/8/18) (In wide release.)

### Skidoo

Otto Preminger's ultimate embrace of youth culture, from 1968, is one of the most wonderfully strange of all Hollywood comedies. Jackie Gleason plays a retired gangster named Tony who's forced to do one last job: he's smuggled into Alcatraz to murder an informant (Mickey Rooney). Meanwhile, Tony is scandalized when his teen-age daughter, Darlene (Alexandra Hay),

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## DANCE

joins a band of hippies, whom Tony's wife, Flo (Carol Channing), organizes to confront the Mob. In prison, Tony shares a cell with a draft resister (Austin Pendleton) and accidentally samples his stash of LSD. Preminger's rendering of psychedelic hallucinations results in his giddiest visual inspirations, which come with sharp political twists. The scattershot and hectic comedy conveys Preminger's sense that the world he knows is coming apart at the seams; he does more than depict or caricature the cultural shifts and the generational clashes of the times—he finds new cinematic forms for them. The movie is an astonishment of tone and style throughout (Groucho Marx plays a gangland boss called God), and it's very much a musical, down to its ingenious end credits, which are composed and sung by Harry Nilsson.—*R.B. (Film Forum, March 8.)*

## Waiting for the Barbarians

Without sets or props, the writer and director Eugène Green turns a workshop for a dozen actors in Toulouse into a richly substantial contrivance of theatrical whimsy. Four men (the Poet, the Homeless Man, the Hipster, and the Non-Hipster) and two women (the Hipsterelle and the Paintress) arrive at the ornate and ancient villa of a middle-aged pair of magi and the ghost of their late daughter. The wanderers are seeking refuge from menacing barbarians (identified as anyone from Visigoths to "United-Statesians"). After confiscating their cell phones, the magi cast their guests into darkness, where, with only their faces illuminated, they're made to talk—in archly literary dialogue, with archaic diction, that's pierced by comedic glints of modern slang and sharp epigrams that delve deep into intimate yearnings and range far in political observations. Then, in a bare chamber, the magi stage an actual twelfth-century romance that inspires the group to face the world and defy the barbarians. Green unites his multifaceted artistry—featuring dramatic production, historical investigation, and sharply rarefied images—in a concise, philosophical, and comedic tour de force.—*R.B. (Film Society of Lincoln Center, March 13 and March 16.)*

## Werewolf

By means of ferociously intimate images, tensely controlled performances, and a spare sense of drama, Ashley McKenzie's first feature, about two young drug addicts in Nova Scotia, conjures a state of heightened consciousness. It's the story of Nessa (Bhreagh MacNeil), age nineteen, and her boyfriend, Blaise (Andrew Gillis), who live in an abandoned trailer in the woods and measure out their days in methadone doses administered by a local clinic while scrounging for small pay by mowing lawns on stolen gasoline. Going home to her mother, Nessa tries to change her life, finding a job at a nearby ice-cream stand. (Extreme closeups of the food she prepares and the tasks she masters suggest a grasp on the first rungs, both aesthetic and practical, of autonomy.) Meanwhile, Blaise—hoping to salvage a life with Nessa—reacts angrily to the regulations that the social-services system imposes on addicts and contends with his physical cravings and deadened emotions. Working with the cinematographer Scott Moore, McKenzie frames her characters with a radical obliqueness, visually conveying their wounded tenderness and stifled fury and evoking mortal struggles with minuscule gestures.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*



Highlights include works by Twyla Tharp and Jerome Robbins, and the *Dancing the Gods* festival.

Spring is the busiest season for dance—for starters, it's when the two big New York-based ballet companies, **New York City Ballet** (April 24-June 3, at the David H. Koch) and **American Ballet Theatre** (May 14-July 7, at the Metropolitan Opera House), have duelling seasons at Lincoln Center. City Ballet's run is dominated by a tribute to Jerome Robbins in his centennial year ("Robbins 100," May 3-20). The retrospective comprises nineteen ballets, including a few rarities—like "Dybbuk" and "Les Noces"—plus a compilation of excerpts of Broadway hits like "On the Town" and "Fiddler on the Roof." A.B.T.'s season features a new reconstruction of Petipa's 1900 commedia-dell'arte charmer, "Harlequinade," by Alexei Ratmanský, and "Afterite," by the British showman Wayne McGregor, set to Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring."

Two juggernauts from the nineteen-seventies make appearances in Juilliard's "**Spring Dances**" program, at the Peter Jay Sharp Theatre, March 21-24. If you haven't seen Twyla Tharp's "Deuce Coupe" (1973), set to songs by the Beach Boys, do yourself a favor and catch this show. Tharp's mating of ballet and popular music—a style she returned to in productions like "Movin' Out"—is sly, sexy, and streetwise. "Deuce" shares a program with Merce Cunningham's 1975 tour de force "Sounddance," in which the danc-

ers burst forth from behind a curtain and don't stop moving until they disappear back into its folds, seventeen minutes later.

In the six years since its return from a long hiatus, **Dance Theatre of Harlem** has added new works to its repertory (most of them with a social message) while also looking to its past. This season (April 4-7, at City Center), it brings back a company favorite by the Trinidadian choreographer and actor Geoffrey Holder. "Dougla" is a big, colorful, semi-ethnographic dance based on the rituals of the Dougla people of Trinidad and Tobago, whose mixed South Asian and African heritage makes for an intriguing fusion of rhythmic footwork and sinuous upper-body movement.

This year's edition of the **Dancing the Gods** festival, at Symphony Space, brings something unusual: *sattriya*, a form of sung-and-danced theatre that was developed in the monasteries of Assam in the fifteenth century, as part of the monks' devotion to Krishna. On April 22, "Sattriya: An Odyssey of the Spirit" will be jointly performed by a troupe of monks from Assam and the Sattriya Dance Company, from Philadelphia. On the previous night, the young rising star Amrita Lahiri will perform a solo evening of *kuchipudi*—a light, quick, sensual dance from Andhra Pradesh.

—Marina Harss



**Paul Taylor American Modern Dance**

The eighty-seven-year-old choreographer has made his hundred-and-forty-seventh dance, "Concertiana," which will be unveiled during the company's three-week season, along with new works by the modern-dance stalwart Doug Varone and the up-and-comer Bryan Arias. Taylor's productivity is impressive, even if the quality of his creations has flagged of late. There is no doubt about the quality of many of his earlier works, though—pieces like "Esplanade," "Eventide," and the twisted "Cloven Kingdom" touch on essential aspects of the human experience. Two other twentieth-century masters will also be represented in the season. The Trisha Brown Dance Company will perform one of Brown's most memorable works, "Set and Reset" (1983), with silvery costumes by Robert Rauschenberg and a score by Laurie Anderson. And a medley of Isadora Duncan's early-twentieth-century pieces will be performed by Sara Mearns, of New York City Ballet. (*David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. March 6-11 and March 13. Through March 25.*)

**"Arthur Mitchell: Harlem's Ballet Trailblazer"**

Before Arthur Mitchell founded Dance Theatre of Harlem, he was the first African-American principal dancer for New York City Ballet. This exhibit, organized by the dance historian Lynn Garafola, includes photographs, writings, and artifacts from Mitchell's personal collection. Notable are the telegram he received from Lincoln Kirstein in 1955, inviting him to join the corps de ballet of New York City Ballet, and rare video footage of his work. (*Wallach Art Gallery, Lenfest Center for the Arts, Columbia University, 615 W. 129th St. 212-854-6800. Through March 11.*)

**BalletNext**

Michele Wiles's ensemble returns from a year-long hiatus, during which the former American Ballet Theatre principal had a baby girl. In the interim, there has been a change in the company's M.O.—unlike before, all of the works to be presented are by Wiles herself. Each piece explores a different theme. One is inspired by the syncopations and improvisations of jazz and is set to jazz piano and trumpet (played live). Another integrates sign language into the choreography, and includes a sign-language interpreter onstage. Another delves into the mechanics of female-female partnering, an under-explored area of ballet. (*New York Live Arts, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. March 6-10.*)

**Tulsa Ballet**

When this company last appeared in New York, in 2009, the event glowed with Oklahoma pride, but the program clashed with New York tastes. This time, the troupe brings three works made for it in the past year. Two are by fairly well-known choreographers, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa and the William Forsythe disciple Helen Pickett, who both offer sleek pieces about anguished outsiders. The final selection is "Glass Figures," a world première by the company's resident choreographer, Ma Cong, who recently choreographed "M. Butterfly" on Broadway. (*Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. March 6-10.*)

**"Dancing Platform Praying Grounds"**

This spring's Platform at Danspace Project, curated by Reggie Wilson, focusses on the in-

tersections of dance, race, religion, and architecture. The events continue with "Dossier Charrette: A Series of Working Dance Essays." Borrowing from the architectural practice of creating on a tight deadline, Wilson challenges choreographers to make ten-minute responses to historical research by the scholar Prithi Kanakamedala. The selected participants are promisingly varied, from the on-fire formalist Beth Gill to the flamboyantly charismatic Miguel Gutierrez, the theatrical Edisa Weeks, and the bright youths Jonathan Gonzalez and Angie Pittman. The range of ages, racial backgrounds, and aesthetics should make the end-of-show chat with Wilson especially interesting. (*St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. March 8-10.*)

**Heidi Latsky Dance**

For more than a decade, Latsky has been working with disabled dancers, challenging norms of beauty and notions of what "disabled" might mean. "D.I.S.P.L.A.Y.E.D." is an immersive performance installation in which the members of a large cast, whom Latsky describes as "living sculptures," are scattered around the lobby and in the theatre, allowing for close interactions between viewer and viewed. Other sections are more like a show. Erin Ball, whose legs both end just below the knee, performs a thirty-minute solo in which she and her wheelchair twirl acrobatically on strands of silk. (*Nagelberg Theatre, Baruch Performing Arts Center, 55 Lexington Ave. 646-312-5073. March 8-10.*)

**Sokolow Theatre/Dance Ensemble**

Anna Sokolow, a major innovator of modern dance whose hyper-intense works are now unjustly neglected, died in 2000, but her namesake company soldiers on, a little under the radar. Its first program under the artistic direction of Samantha Geracht includes Sokolow's nightmarish "Dreams" and her dreamy "Poem," as well as a reconstruction of her mercurial "Moods." (*Actors Fund Arts Center, 160 Schermerhorn St., Brooklyn. 800-838-3006. March 8-11.*)

**Pigeonwing Dance**

The movement style of the choreographer Gabrielle Lamb is eccentric, and her penchant for extreme segmentation of the body is sometimes playful, but not always. To the Harkness Dance Festival, she brings "Bewilderment," inspired by Rebecca Solnit's "A Paradise Built in Hell." The articulated body parts interlock into assembly lines, house-of-cards structures, and totem poles—curious forms of interpersonal connection in a dark world. (*92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. March 9-10.*)

**Flamenco Festival**

The second week of this annual festival at City Center sees the return of Eva Yerbabuena, a master who can make traditional modes feel freshly inspired. In "Carne Y Hueso" ("Flesh and Bone"), a kind of greatest-hits program, her solos alternate with numbers by five male dancers which are sometimes of questionable taste (one is about a sad, red-nosed clown). But Yerbabuena, goaded by fine musicians, is reliably electric. On Sunday, Jesús Carmona—a showboat whose technique is supercharged not just in the feet but also in the upper body—brings his own company and "Impetus," a show of solid standards and intriguing cross-genre hybrids. (*131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. March 9-11.*)



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## ART



*The season includes political art by Latin American women and the drawings of Terry Winters.*

The urge to give human bodies sculptural form has been around at least as long as the Venus of Willendorf—which is to say, for about twenty-five thousand years. The Met Breuer starts its story of figurative sculpture a little bit later, in the fourteenth century, with the exhibition **“Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body (1300-Now).”** The show zeros in on another ancient impulse: to ramp up realism with the application of paint or the addition of fabric. (The Greeks and the Romans did it, and so did Degas, adding a cotton skirt and a satin ribbon to his bronze dancer.) Interspersed with some

hundred and twenty sculptures—by artists from Donatello and Rodin to Louise Bourgeois and Isa Genzken—will be wax effigies, mannequins, and anatomical models. (Opens March 21.)

In 1991, Adrian Piper, a native New Yorker who now lives in Berlin, became the first African-American woman to receive tenure as a professor of philosophy (her subject is Kant)—but that’s not why she’s getting a retrospective at MOMA. Piper, who was awarded the Golden Lion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, is a pioneering Conceptualist and performance artist who has been challenging assumptions about race,

class, and gender for fifty years. The museum devotes its entire sixth floor to a living artist for the first time with the exhibition **“Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965-2016.”** (Opens March 31.)

The biomorphic drawings in **“Terry Winters: Facts and Fictions,”** at the Drawing Center, may appear abstract, but for forty years the Brooklyn-born painter has been heeding the advice of Cézanne: “Treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone.” What’s more, Winters began treating the natural world as an intricately networked system long before digital technologies took over our lives. (Opens April 6.)

The exhibition **“Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985,”** which comes to the Brooklyn Museum from the Hammer Museum, in L.A., was seven years in the making, yet it feels tailor-made for a cultural moment when women’s voices are finally being heard. Most of the show’s hundred and twenty artists from fifteen countries will be unknown to viewers, including the thirteen from the United States. All of their work is political, and much of it was made in response to repressive governments. (Opens April 13.)

Benedict was nicknamed the Prada Pope because of his penchant for luxury goods, but Pope Francis has traded his predecessor’s ermine-trimmed satin robes for basic white cotton. What, then, does he make of the Met Costume Institute’s upcoming show **“Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination”**? The exhibition, which will extend into the museum’s medieval rooms and continue uptown, at the Cloisters, has the Vatican’s blessing—around fifty items will be on loan from its collection. There are Italian designers, of course, including Valentino, Versace, and Dolce & Gabbana, in addition to garments from Balenciaga, Chanel, and many more, all seen in the context of religious works from the Met’s holdings. (Opens May 10.)

—Andrea K. Scott



## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

**Museum of Modern Art**

"Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil"

Some artists are so iconic they're known by only one name: Brancusi, Léger, Tarsila. Wait, who? The painter Tarsila do Amaral is so famous in her native Brazil that, forty-three years after her death, she helped to close out the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics, when a pattern of red-orange-yellow arcs graced the stadium floor, an homage to her 1929 painting "Setting Sun." That chimerical landscape—a stylized sunset above tubular cactuses and a herd of capybaras that shape-shift into boulders—hangs now in the artist's first-ever museum exhibition in the United States. The show doesn't stint on process-revealing black-and-white drawings or biographical ephemera. (Look for a photo of Tarsila in Paris, with a group that includes a wild-looking Brancusi, hanging out in a boat.) But the paintings are the main event, notably Tarsila's perversely proportioned nudes, including "Abaporu," made in 1928. Seated in a stripped-down landscape—green ground, a greener saguaro, blue sky, and a lemon-yellow disk that splits the difference between flower and sun—a figure is portrayed in the pose of a thinker, with a tiny head resting on a spindly arm and a monstrosously swollen foot, as if the intellect were dwarfed by the body's sensations. The painting's brazenly tropical modernism inspired Tarsila's second husband, the poet Oswald de Andrade, to write the "Manifesto of Anthropophagy," a call to cannibalize foreign influences, which resounded in Brazilian culture for decades. This sublimely weird show is an eye-opening corrective to an art history that has treated key chapters—those that aren't Eurocentric—as if they were written in invisible ink. As Andrade wrote in his manifesto, "Joy is the decisive test." *Through June 3.*

**New Museum**

"2018 Triennial: Songs for Sabotage"

This show, co-curated by Alex Gartenfeld and Gary Carrion-Murayari, tethers fresh artists to stale palaver. The work of these twenty-six individuals and groups, ranging in age from twenty-five to thirty-five, from nineteen countries, is for the most part formally conservative (painting, weaving, ceramics). The framing discourse is boilerplate radical. The catalogue and verbose wall texts adduce abstract evils of "late capitalism" and (this one may be new to you) "late liberalism," which the artists are presumed to subvert. In principle, the aim reflects the museum's valuable policy of incubating upstart trends in contemporary art. But it comes off as willfully naïve. Nearly all the participants plainly hail from an international archipelago of art schools and hip scenes and have launched on normal career paths. Noting that they share political discontents, as the young tend to do, is easy. Harder, in the context, is registering their originalities as creators—like bumps under an ideological blanket. Two standouts are painters who evince independent streaks at odds with the ideal of collectivity that the curators promulgate. The Kenyan Chemu Ng'ok, who is based in South Africa, has developed a confidently ebullient Expressionism—faces and figures teeming laterally and in depth—in deep-toned, plangent colors. She's not propagandizing; she's painting. Even more impressive is the Haitian abstractionist Thomm El-Saieh, who lives in Miami. From a distance, his three large acrylic paintings suggest speckled veils of atmospheric color. Up close, they reveal thousands of tiny marks, blotches, and erasures, each discretely energetic and decisive. Grasping for their coher-

ence is like trying to breathe underwater—which, to your pleasant surprise, as in a dream, you find that you can almost do. *Through May 27.*

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

**Markus Brunetti**

The German photographer's pictures of church façades have nothing to do with religion, but you still have to take them on faith. If you stood in front of one of these majestic buildings in Europe or Britain, what you would see is not what Brunetti reveals, because each image is an amalgamation of thousands of photographs, shot with a large-format camera and then digitally stitched together. (The entire process usually takes several years.) Brunetti also erases all signs of modern life. A smattering of gravestones at the base of a medieval church in Borgund, Norway, might seem like the closest he comes to acknowledging the human race, until you consider the countless anonymous stonemasons, wood-carvers, ironworkers, tile setters, gilders, sculptors, and stained-glass makers whose painstaking work he memorializes. Still, for all its grandeur, Brunetti's work has a laborious, even clinical edge that holds him back from the ranks of the great German typologists Bernd and Hilla Becher, to whom he is often compared. *Through March 17. (Milo, 245 Tenth Ave., at 24th St. 212-414-0370.)*

**Bruce Conner**

If you missed the recent MOMA survey dedicated to the quicksilver Bay Area artist, who died in 2008, at the age of seventy-four, this show makes a fine introduction. A recently restored version of Conner's 16-mm. film "Report," from 1967—on view alongside the ingeniously irritating avant-girly movie "Marilyn Times Five," made in 1973—considers how a nation processes trauma, the magnetic appeal of conspiracy theories, and the slippery nature of time. Beginning with a clip of J.F.K. and Jackie in their open car in Dallas, in 1963, Conner collages found news footage with scenes culled from monster movies and bullfights to convey the anguish, the horror, and the confusion of the President's assassination. A rapidly flashing blank screen stands in for the murder itself, but the most affecting moment arrives when an announcer repeats the news of Kennedy's death, rephrasing it slightly each time, as if searching for a formulation that makes sense. *Through March 24. (Cooper, 534 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105.)*

**Barkley L. Hendricks**

Hendricks's Pop-inflected, sharply observed paintings of stylish, self-possessed subjects are a major influence on many younger black painters—the Obama portraitists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherard among them. (Hendricks died last year, at the age of seventy-two.) This exhibition of recently discovered works on paper, made between 1974 and 1984, reveals a different side of his work. Neither studies nor sketches, the spare, multimedia compositions are elegantly elusive—self-contained statements that incorporate found materials (X-rays, fake currency, stamps), which hang alongside meticulous watercolor-and-graphite renderings of bananas, TV screens, and mosquitos, among other subjects. These marvels, like Hendricks's paintings, display his penchant for the intensity of the isolated figure. In the 1979 collage "Sidecar #1 (For Miles)"—a study in freedom—he floats a silhouette of the jazz trumpeter above the Declaration of Independence. *Through March 24. (Shainman, 513 W. 20th St. 212-645-1701.)*



# MEMORY UNEARTHED THE LODZ GHETTO PHOTOGRAPHS OF HENRYK ROSS

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### Alex Da Corte

The unlikely beauty of casino décor and trade-show design is put to garishly surreal ends in this Philadelphia artist's installations. In the gallery's window, a mixed-media concoction of neon, vinyl siding, and paint, complete with a cartoonish candle, strikes a tongue-in-cheek note of hospitality. Once inside, a large overturned sculpture of a cat suggests something more sinister. Two works, titled "Bad Breeze (III)" and "Bad Pie," hint at campy domestic catastrophe with a pair of cinematic clichés: a pastry cooling on a windowsill and billowing curtains. In a psychedelic video projection in the back room, a woman in rollers clutches a fat cat while rehearsing expressions of fear, a sight that's as mesmerizing as a lava lamp. *Through March 18.* (Karma, 188 E. 2nd St. 212-390-8290.)

### Nate Plotkin

This young Brooklyn painter makes a promising solo debut, toggling between the ease of a natural-born talent (he dropped out of art school) and a willful naiveté that suggests a soft spot for the German Expressionists and the oddball canvases of the cult filmmaker George Kuchar. A falling paratrooper's boots are realistically modelled in the graphite drawing "Last Two," but his hips appear anatomically out of whack. The tone careens from cozy (the portrait "Johanna with Bagel") to dystopian ("Cyborg Women"). What holds the show together is Plotkin's feel for the genuine strangeness of life. *Through March 11.* (Shrine, 191 Henry St. 347-693-4979.)

### Peter Scott

It's best to see this event in reverse. Start in the basement, where Scott has curated a show of ten conceptual-leaning works on the theme of enclosed nature. Jeff Gibson slyly arranges images of hedges and sod on an inkjet print as if they were clip art, Ethan Breckenridge encases a houseplant in a clear box, and Vija Celmins contributes a reliably beautiful cropped view of ocean waves. Then head upstairs for a heady meditation on the ersatz Arcadian in urban environments. Two images are partially obscured by one-way mirrors: a photograph, by Joel Sternfeld, of the pre-rehabilitated High Line, and one, by Scott, of the same view today. Most impressive are Scott's keenly observed pictures of in-progress luxury developments, construction sites sporting vinyl signage printed with bucolic fantasies of what isn't there. *Through March 25.* (Magenta Plains, 94 Allen St. 917-388-2464.)

### "A Page from My Intimate Journal (Part I)"

A 1974 silkscreen of absurdist non-words by the French-born Conceptualist Guy de Cointet provides the title for this lively group show of almost fifty artists, and also for the dark fable written by Wayne Koestenbaum that accompanies it. The apocalyptic tenor of the text is a dramatic foil to the winsome pieces in the salon-style installation. Among them are a painting, like a swath of madras plaid, by Matt Connors; mandala-like drawings by Sanou Oumar; Charlotte Posenenske's simple, off-kilter, felt-tip-marker sketches; and Siobhan Liddell's gracefully ropy, tchotchke-size glazed ceramics. Scattered throughout are eight intricate vintage diagrams by anonymous Indian draftsmen, which corral the rest of the far-flung works into a casual but spiritual treatise on the intimacies of making art. *Through April 8.* (Gordon Robichaux, 41 Union Square W.; enter at 22 E. 17th St. 646-678-5532.)

## CLASSICAL MUSIC



Featured this spring: the voices of the people of Philadelphia, and the musicians of the Met Opera.

Pianists rule at the **New York Philharmonic** this spring. **Leif Ove Andsnes**, the elder statesman of the group, has earned the right to range freely: his orchestral appearances (with the conductor Edward Gardner, April 26 and April 28) feature Debussy's rarely heard *Fantasia* for Piano and Orchestra, while a David Geffen Hall recital (May 2) includes equally out-of-the-way works by Nielsen, Sibelius, and Schubert, along with a recent piece by Jörg Widmann and Beethoven's "Tempest" Sonata. **Till Fellner** (April 19-24), **Bertrand Chamayou** (May 17-22), and **Benjamin Grosvenor** (April 4-6)—three newcomers to the Philharmonic—keep to safer ground, though the concerts with Grosvenor, the most startlingly original of the three, also offer a brand-new orchestral work by the acclaimed young composer **Anna Thorvaldsdóttir**. That program is conducted by **Esa-Pekka Salonen**, another Scandinavian composer of note.

The iconic American composer **Frederic Rzewski** is renowned for his piano music—he's a virtuoso on the instrument himself—but that won't be the focus of a concert at **Miller Theatre** (April 19). Rather, the spotlight will fall on his works for string quartet, one very early and one newly commissioned; at nearly eighty, he's still working. (The Del Sol String Quartet does the hon-

ors.) Another new-music event of interest comes courtesy of the exciting conductor **Yannick Nézet-Séguin** and the **Philadelphia Orchestra** (April 10, at Carnegie Hall): a performance of "Philadelphia Voices," a new piece by **Tod Machover**, a gifted composer who occupies a unique space between high art and advanced technology. The work, which incorporates sounds from the city and its people, is part of a program that also includes Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms" and Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition."

Before Nézet-Séguin begins his tenure as music director of the **Metropolitan Opera**, in the fall, the house will offer its last production of the season: the Met premiere of Massenet's "Cendrillon" (beginning April 12), a fairy-tale opera as light as spun sugar. It gives the mezzo-soprano **Joyce DiDonato** a chance to shine in a production, by Laurent Pelly, that has previously played at the Santa Fe Opera and Covent Garden. **Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla**, in the first of three programs (May 18), will debut as the first woman to conduct the **Met Orchestra** at Carnegie Hall; the other concerts are led by two distinguished veterans, **Gianandrea Noseda** (May 30) and **Michael Tilson Thomas** (June 5).

—Russell Platt



OPERA

**Metropolitan Opera**

The Met has just announced that the conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin will begin his tenure as music director this fall, two years ahead of schedule. Fresh off his success leading the company in an enthralling rendition of Wagner's "Parsifal," the dynamic Canadian maestro next tackles an opera almost as forbidding: Richard Strauss's "Elektra." Patrice Chéreau's acclaimed production stars the American dramatic soprano Christine Goerke, who caused a sensation in the title role at Carnegie Hall three years ago. The cast also includes Elza van den Heever, Michaela Schuster, and Jay Hunter Morris. *March 9 at 8 and March 12 at 7:30.* • **Also playing:** The latest revival of "La Bohème" has an excellent cast headed by Sonya Yoncheva (late of the Met's new "Tosca"), Michael Fabiano, Susanna Phillips, and Lucas Meacham; Marco Armiliato, the Met's trusted Italian hand, is on the podium. (These are the final performances.) *March 7 at 7:30 and March 10 at 8:30.* • Anthony Minghella's vividly cinematic staging of "Madama Butterfly," an early high point of Peter Gelb's tenure, still feels clean, fresh, and vital more than a decade later. The revival stars Ermonela Jaho, Roberto Aronica, Maria Zifchak, and Roberto Frontali; Armiliato. (Luis Chapa and Dwayne Croft replace Aronica and Frontali in the second performance.) *March 8 and March 13 at 7:30.* • In John Copley's monumental production of Rossini's rarely performed "Semiramide," a bass, a tenor, and a mezzo-soprano (in a trouser role) compete in a three-way race for the heart of an ingénue and the throne of the ancient Assyrian empire. It's a transparent setup for a game of one-upmanship, and what follows is a string of arias and ensembles in which a supremely talented cast of bel-canto singers—Ildar Abdrazakov, Javier Camarena, and Elizabeth DeShong—compete in feats of vocal derring-do. Angela Meade takes the title role; Maurizio Benini. *March 10 at 1.* (*Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.*)

**Leonard Bernstein's "A Quiet Place"**

Seeking new performances for this brilliant but problematic opera, the Leonard Bernstein estate has authorized a chamber adaptation by Garth Edwin Sunderland, which removes the "Trouble in Tahiti" scenes and restores music from the rest of the opera that was cut from previous editions. The singers and players of Curtis Opera Theatre travel north to present a concert performance in New York, conducted by the music director of Opera Philadelphia, Corrado Rovaris. *March 13 at 8.* (*Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. curtis.edu.*)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

**Voices of Ascension: "Jacob and His Twelve Sons"**

Dennis Keene's outstanding professional choir and orchestra partners with the Frick Collection in presenting a musical pendant to the museum's current exhibition of paintings by Zurbarán, on loan from Auckland Castle, in England. The repertoire is apt: music from the Spanish Golden Age (by Victoria, Lobo, and others), from the New World, and from Britain (excerpts from Handel's oratorio "Joseph and His Brethren"). *March 13 at 7:30.* (*Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, Madison Ave. at 13rd St. voicesofascension.org.*)

**Philadelphia Orchestra**

Unlike Charles Dutoit, the orchestra's most recent master of the Franco-Russian repertoire, Yannick

Nézet-Séguin, the current music director, takes a more than passing interest in contemporary music. He conducts the New York premiere of the Violin Concerto by the innovative Dutch composer Michel van der Aa (performed by a star Dutch soloist, Janine Jansen) as a prelude to Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony, an irresistible wave of late-Romantic melody. *March 13 at 8.* (*Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.*)

RECITALS

**Tristan Perich**

A composer, programmer, and instrument builder admired for producing works of beguiling complexity using relatively uncomplicated electronic sound sources (with and without acoustic instruments), Perich presents a live performance linked to "Noise Patterns," his solo exhibition of machine-driven drawings exploring "codified entropy"—the same theme he investigated (with bursts of surprisingly visceral digital noise) on his 2016 audio release of the same title. *March 7 at 6.* (*Bitforms Gallery, 131 Allen St. bitforms.com. No tickets required.*)

**Pierre-Laurent Aimard**

On a new recording for the Pentatone label, this stellar French pianist swoops and soars through the avian evocations of Messiaen's "Catalogue d'Oiseaux," revelling in its prismatic colors and vivacious rhythms. You'll hear a portion of that work in Aimard's latest Carnegie Hall recital, which also features pieces by Liszt, Scriabin, and Nikolai Obukhov, and culminates in Beethoven's monumental "Hammerklavier" Sonata. *March 8 at 8.* (*212-247-7800.*)

**Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**

This year, the Society's Winter Festival centers on a little-known but crucial musical figure of early-nineteenth-century Vienna: the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the first person to form a professional string quartet, who played in the premiere performances of now beloved works by Beethoven and Schubert. The first of four programs offers two string-quartet chestnuts (Haydn's "Rider" Quartet and Mozart's Quartet in D Minor, K. 421), along with Beethoven's early Quintet in E-Flat for Piano and Winds. The musicians include the pianist Wu Qian, the clarinetist Alexander Fiterstein, the bassoonist Peter Kolkay, and the members of the Juilliard String Quartet. *March 13 at 7:30.* (*Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788.*)

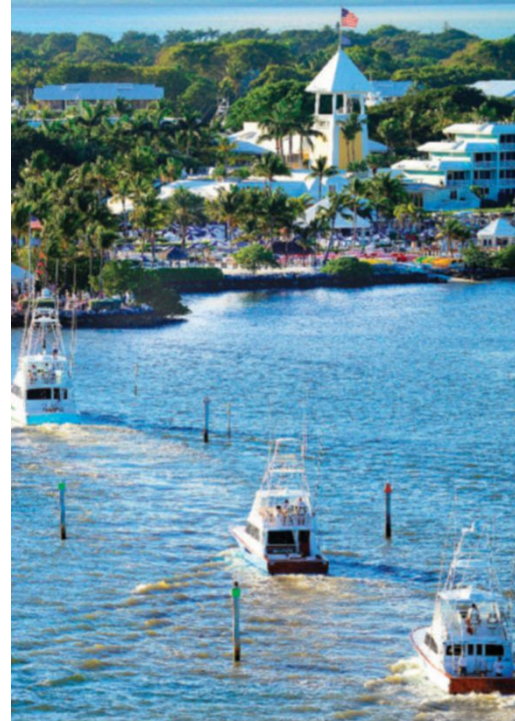
**Quatuor Ebène**

The unfailingly stylish French ensemble mixes standard repertoire from France (the string quartets by Fauré and Dutilleux) with classic Beethoven (the "Razumovsky" Quartet No. 2 in E Minor) in a concert of Continental comfort food at Zankel Hall. *March 13 at 7:30.* (*212-247-7800.*)

**New York Festival of Song: "From Lute Songs to the Beatles: Songs of the British Isles"**

This survey—presented, roughly, in chronological order—rejoices in the eminent good taste, emotional restraint, and sidesplitting wit of British song literature going back to the sixteenth century. The program is admirably agnostic on the question of what "art song" entails, with choice selections from both classicists (Purcell, Elgar, Britten, and Finzi) and composers in a more popular vein (Sullivan, Coward, and Lennon and McCartney). Steven Blier and Adam Rothenberg accompany a quartet of fine young vocalists. *March 13 at 8.* (*Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330.*)

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## NIGHT LIFE



*Demi Lovato has kicked off her “Tell Me You Love Me” tour, in support of her sixth album. She is joined by DJ Khaled, rap’s loudest master of ceremonies.*

It’s a match made in L.A.: **Demi Lovato** and **DJ Khaled** have embarked on a co-headlining arena tour as restorative as the sight of spring blossoms. At just twenty-five, Lovato has overcome a full suite of Hollywood pitfalls—the former Disney star spent her early twenties navigating the dense pop-music machine, and by 2010 she’d left a tour with the Jonas Brothers to enter a sober-living facility. Since then, Lovato has scored dozens of Hot 100 hits, including last year’s empowerment anthem “Sorry Not Sorry,” and has become an outspoken activist for mental-health awareness and addiction prevention. For her March 16 date at Barclays Center, she’s found a fitting co-host in DJ Khaled, a Miami radio personality turned hit producer, who is currently enjoying a third life as a Snapchat self-help motivator.

**Camila Cabello**, who plays at Terminal 5 on May 4, is building a career after breaking out as a member of Fifth Harmony. With “Havana,” released last August, she cemented her solo sound; the duet with the Atlanta rapper Young

Thug is a Latin-tinged smash in the narrative vein of Harry Belafonte’s “Jamaica Farewell.” Who said there are no more love songs?

Last month, the alt-rock legends **the Breeders** released a single from their first album in ten years. “Nervous Mary” has all the loping, spacey harmonies and sludgy feedback of the band’s classic catalogue, still beloved by reformed nihilists of a certain age. Kim Deal formed the Breeders in 1988, after serving as the original bassist for the Pixies; she was soon joined by her twin sister, Kelley, on guitar. Thirty years later, the original lineup’s new material is refreshing in its conviction, content with the bratty, fuzzy harmonies that outlined early songs like “Safari” and “Cannonball.” It’s possible that a decade apart kept the band’s sound in a vacuum. (They dissolved messily in 1994, on the cusp of crossover success.) Luckily for fans, the Breeders tapped the formative grunge engineer Steve Albini for the new record, which they’ll stage at Brooklyn Steel on April 30. The generation of bedroom punks who grew

up on Deal riffs includes the spunky Aussie guitarist **Courtney Barnett**, who plays the Music Hall of Williamsburg on May 19.

If comebacks are in style, **Remy Ma** is characteristically on trend. The Bronx rapper watched music move on without her during the six years that she spent in prison, following an arrest in 2007. Before her sentencing, she’d earned a reputation as a sharp-tongued lyricist with a raspy lilt and blond bangs. Hits like “Lean Back” and “Conceited” made Remy a household name (in houses with MTV2), and laid the groundwork for female m.c.s like Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, who have built on her street-glam sound and style. But Remy returned with a bid of her own in 2016: “All the Way Up,” a collaboration with her longtime labelmate and friend Fat Joe, was certified platinum and nominated for a Grammy. Remy Ma headlines Irving Plaza on March 16, in support of a new album, “Seven Winters and Six Summers,” due out this spring.

—Matthew Trammell



## ROCK AND POP

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

**Elvis Costello**

Costello isn't the intense spitfire he was in the late seventies, when he led the crop of angry young men who bridged the gap between punk and New Wave. Nor is he the songwriting superhero he was in the eighties, when he could knock out classic albums like "King of America" and "Blood and Chocolate" in the same year, or the restless talent of the nineties, when he jumped from genre to genre, often via collaboration, flirting with classical ("The Juliet Letters," with the Brodsky Quartet) and sublimely subtle adult pop ("Painted from Memory," with Burt Bacharach). These days, though, Costello still makes interesting choices (his last record, "Wise Up Ghost," was a team-up with the Roots), and he's increasingly sharing the details of his life with his fans; recent New York concerts have included a large-screen display of family photos, scribbled notes, and other personal ephemera. (*Brooklyn Steel*, 319 Frost St., Brooklyn. 888-929-7849. March 7. *Capitol Theatre*, 149 Westchester Ave., Port Chester. *thecapitoltheatre.com*. March 8-9 and March 11.)

**Craig David**

This U.K. pop convert has enjoyed a resurrection that few people could have seen coming. He's been setting the stage since 2013, when he started the TS5 party series in Miami, spinning rave, soul, R. & B., and garage while improvising live performances. The dots were finally connected in 2016, when David performed his 2000 classic "Fill Me In" over the instrumental to Justin Bieber, Diplo, and Skrillex's smash "Where Are Ü Now" live on BBC Radio 1. The studio erupted at the realization that the U.K. garage sound had sneaked back on air via Bieber. A video of the performance racked up four hundred thousand views, and within weeks David had announced a new album and gone back on tour. His comeback record, "Follow My Intuition," cracked the Top 10 in more than thirty countries; his TS5 party stops at the Music Hall of Williamsburg this week. (66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. March 9.)

**Dreamcrusher**

Prolificness is a D.I.Y. badge of honor. From Lil B to Alex G, artists who go it alone are doubly respected for going at it a lot: self-releasing hundreds of songs and dozens of albums reads to fans as an expression of obsessive dedication. Since 2006, Luwayne Glass, a noise producer, has delivered at least twenty-six projects as Dreamcrusher—lovers of experimental music may gorge to their limits. If the Wichita native's politics are implied sonically—hard music for hard times—they plainly also drive Glass's provocative visual art and a constellation of social-media output. (*Secret Project Robot*, 1186 Broadway, Brooklyn. *secretprojectrobot.org*. March 7.)

**Habibi**

Rahill Jamalifard, who fronts this all-female Brooklyn band, teases out the best of the English language in the catchy, kitschy quips on Habibi's self-titled debut, from 2013. The group combines the Colgate-white glisten of sixties-girl-group pop with an uncensored edge; its songs are soft but savvy, preened for high-profile movie soundtracks and sitcoms. (Habibi's music has popped up in a James Franco film and on the runway at the last New York Fashion Week.) Perhaps all that's kept the band from receiving more attention is its slow

pace of output. This week, Habibi plays a release concert for its long-awaited new EP, "Cardamom Garden," which digs deeper into Jamalifard's Iranian roots, with some lyrics written in Farsi. (*National Sawdust*, 80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 646-779-8455. March 12.)

**Danny Krivit**

In 1971, on the advice of a friend who owned the Stonewall Inn, Bobby Krivit converted the Ninth Circle, his fledgling West Village lounge and steakhouse, into a bar that would serve the neighborhood's growing gay community. Business boomed quickly—to keep his new basement disco churning, Bobby enlisted his stepson Danny to program tapes with dance music and custom edits. That same year, Danny met James Brown, who gave him a white-label copy of "Get on the Good Foot," and thus began Danny's decorated career as a dance-music jockey and promoter for landmark clubs throughout New York City, including the Loft, Area, Lime-light, and the Paradise Garage. (*Output*, 74 Wythe Ave., Brooklyn. *outputclub.com*. March 11.)

**Moor Mother**

Camae Ayewa—a poet, vocalist, and masterly sound collager—performs confrontational music under the moniker Moor Mother. During her days in the Philadelphia underground, in the early aughts, Ayewa recorded hundreds of unpolished, self-released songs and played in the local venues where she worked as a show booker. She describes her material as a mixture of "low-fi, dark rap, chill step, blk girl blues, witch rap, coffee shop riot gurl songs, southern girl dittys and black ghost songs," and has focussed on both interrogating and becoming a vehicle for truth. "Fetish Bones," an album she made using analog noise machines and field recordings, is a collection of fittingly dense industrial compositions. She unveils the processes behind her second solo album, "Analog Fluids of Sonic Black Holes," at this multimedia performance and exhibition, which includes film, music, and poetry. (*The Kitchen*, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. March 6-7.)

**Pill & Maluca Dog**

The ethos of the buzzy night spot Baby's All Right—relaxed atmosphere, expert music programming, and dollar tacos—has turned it into a mainstay for artists showcasing in South Williamsburg. The stage is adorned with a site-specific light installation made by John Cole from nearly four hundred backlit antique ashtrays—a beacon for indie outfits like Beach House, DIIV, and Savages. This weekend, two skronky local acts settle in for a party. Pill, from Brooklyn, fits nicely within the history of New York No Wave, playing outré sax-oriented punk rock; Macula Dog, from Queens, specializes in grotesque electronic freak-outs that induce Dada fever dreams. (146 Broadway, Brooklyn. 718-599-5800. March 10.)

**The Music of Led Zeppelin**

Michael Dorf's tribute concert series at Carnegie Hall is one of the most enjoyable traditions in a city with no shortage of memorable live shows. The founder of City Winery hosts the fifteenth installment, recruiting twenty-one performers to reimagine the music of the iconic rock pioneers of Led Zeppelin. It's a rare chance to see rock and pop's biggest acts tip their hats to their own musical heroes; billed guests include **O.A.R.**, **Patti Smith**, **J. Mascis**, and **Living Colour**. Proceeds from the concert will go to music education for underprivileged students. (*Seventh Ave. at 57th St.* 212-247-7800. March 7.)

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Leonard Bernstein, photograph with an autograph musical quotation from Jeremiah, signed and inscribed, 1978. Estimate \$1,000 to \$2,000.

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### JAZZ AND STANDARDS

#### Jerry Bergonzi Quartet

Bergonzi, a musician's musician whose exalted reputation as a saxophone wizard far exceeds his fame, lives in Boston, where he teaches at the New England Conservatory of Music. On this visit, he leads a quartet that includes the pianist **Matt Mitchell** and the bassist **Harvie S.** (*Kitano*, 66 Park Ave., at 38th St. 212-885-7119. March 10.)

#### Jane Bunnett and Maqueque

Lately, Cuban music has been popping up on the jazz radar like crazy, but the Canadian soprano saxophonist and flutist Bunnett was on the Caribbean tip long before others began feeling the benefits of the current thaw. Her band Maqueque, featuring five Cuban women jazz musicians, is the latest example of her extraordinary cross-cultural investigations. (*Birdland*, 315 W. 44th St. 212-581-3080. March 13.)

#### Chico Freeman Plus+Tet

Youth passes, as does much of the critical attention that is bestowed on promising young artists; in jazz, only the strong survive. The spotlight that focussed on the twentysomething Freeman, back in the late

seventies, may have dimmed, but this still resourceful saxophonist—here at the helm of a quartet powered by the great drummer **Rudy Royston**—soldiers on. (*Smoke*, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. March 9-11.)

#### Jazz at Lincoln Center Youth Orchestra

The dedicated high-school students who make up this spirited band should be on their toes when they welcome the tenor-saxophone marvel **Lew Tabackin** as a guest soloist. Tabackin, who also swings the flute with enviable dexterity, has had plenty of experience as a featured instrumentalist, having held down that role for thirty-some years in the vaunted big bands he co-led with his wife, Toshiko Akiyoshi. (*Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola*, Broadway at 60th St. 212-258-9595. March 12.)

#### Rebirth Brass Band

This redoubtably funky ensemble has been representing the inexhaustible New Orleans groove since the early eighties, flaunting an expansive repertoire that joins Big Easy anthems with contemporary R. & B. The party only stops when the man blowing the paint off the walls with his tuba calls it a night. (*Blue Note*, 131 W. 3rd St. 212-475-8592. March 8-11.)

## ABOVE & BEYOND



#### Spring Revolution Festival

Each year, National Sawdust hosts a two-week series of events and exhibits in recognition of Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," from 1913. This year, the festival overlaps with International Women's Day, and has scheduled a dense program featuring women curators, artists, and composers. Highlights include Gamelan Dharma Swara, a twenty-five-person ensemble that performs traditional Balinese music, and OK Miss, a chamber group and rock band led by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Du Yun. (*National Sawdust*, 80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 646-779-8455. March 1-11.)

### AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

During a slow week at the big auction houses, two fairs pick up the slack. The **Armory Show**, a sprawling contemporary-art fair, returns to Piers 92 and 94 on Manhattan's West Side (March 8-11). This year's edition focusses on themes of immigration and access in its "Platform" series, a curated subsection of the fair devoted to larger, site-specific works. One of these pieces will be installed outside the venue: a huge image of immigrant families waiting in line, entitled "So Close," by the French artist JR. Inside Pier 94, another installation, by the Brooklynite Tara Donovan, will feature a towering pile of plastic tubes. (*W. 55th St., at 12th Ave. 212-645-6440.*) • Across town, the cavernous drill hall of the

Park Avenue Armory will be jam-packed with book dealers from across the U.S. and Europe, all gathered for the **Antiquarian Book Fair**, now in its fifty-eighth year (March 8-11). The exposition includes first editions, maps, atlases, illuminated manuscripts, photography books, and philosophical tomes galore—solace for the screen-bedraggled masses. (*Park Ave. at 66th St. nyantiquarianbookfair.com.*)

### READINGS AND TALKS

#### Tony Dapolito Recreation Center

In the film adaptation of André Aciman's 2007 novel, "Call Me By Your Name," Timothée Chalamet plays Elio Perlman, a seventeen-year-old Jewish Italian-American introvert who falls for Oliver, a visiting American who has come to intern with Elio's father. There are slight differences between the two works: in an interview with Frank Ocean, published in *VMAN*, Chalamet pointed out that the book is set in 1987 and the film starts the story four years earlier, to avoid referencing the AIDS crisis and to squeeze Talking Heads into the soundtrack. But both versions capture the experience of young love in vivid, universal detail. Aciman, a professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, who has written seven other books, reads from his most famous work and discusses watching his words come to life on the big screen at this talk and Q. & A. (*1 Clarkson St., Room 203. 212-242-5228. March 9 at 6:30.*)



# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Chez Ma Tante

90 Calyer St., Brooklyn (718-389-3606)

Unlike other Montreal-influenced establishments that have opened in New York in the past decade—M. Wells, in Long Island City, or the Jewish deli Mile End—the buzzy new Brooklyn restaurant Chez Ma Tante doesn't bill itself as Québécois, or even Canadian. But the name, which translates to "At My Aunt's House," is borrowed from a beloved hot-dog stand in Montreal. And one of the two chef-owners spent time cooking in that city, which is home to an impressive number of restaurants much like this one: unpretentious but profoundly good, artfully melding and then building on classic European traditions, in order to ultimately transcend them. The space, on a quiet corner of Greenpoint, is vaguely pubby, plainly decorated with dark wood and white walls; the clientele is a neighborhood sort of crowd, unassuming groups in their thirties and forties, some toting sleeping infants. This is not a place to see or be seen, only to eat an exceptional meal as if it's no big deal to do so.

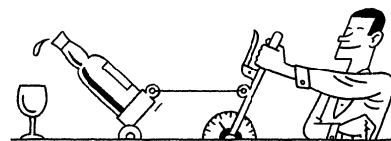
The short menu shifts from season to season. On a recent bleak winter evening, briny Little Gun oysters from Long Island were dressed in hopeful spring finery: milky green pools of olive oil and parsley, like daubs of watercolor before they dry. Chicken-liver pâté, whipped to

the consistency of butter (and served with grilled slices of She Wolf Bakery's miche, the it-bread of the moment), was as nutty and pungent as aged cheddar, which was also on the menu—craggy little boulders of a complex, crystalline variety imported from Missouri. A French fry is a French fry is a French fry, until you've tried the ones at Chez Ma Tante: enormous creamy wedges of russet potato, wearing crispy bronze armor that cracks easily between the teeth but holds up beautifully to thick, garlicky aioli.

Montreal is known for nose-to-tail cooking, especially if the nose and the tail belong to a pig, so Chez Ma Tante's treatment of pork came as a bit of a disappointment. Slices of an oily pig's-head terrine fell apart at the touch of a fork, and thin steaks of grilled pork shoulder marinated in maple syrup, Quebec's proudest export, were treachery. But the meat on a skate wing was as succulent and naturally sweet as fresh crab, and the kedgerie, an Anglo-Indian classic, here composed of flaked cod nestled into lightly curried rice and topped with a celery-and-onion salad, sang at dinner, and again on a Saturday morning. (It's often eaten for breakfast, and especially as a hangover cure.) A stack of brunch pancakes, as round and gigantic as the face of the moon and topped with a fat pat of butter, redeemed the maple syrup. (*Entrées \$17–\$24.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

## BAR TAB



### Montero Bar and Grill

73 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn

Some grandmothers may have a tough time drinking in Brooklyn these days. Newfangled cocktails, served in glasses smoked with rosemary and selling for fifteen dollars a pop, could seem ridiculous to a generation raised on dry Martinis and whiskey-on-the-rocks—simple drinks that one relies on like morning orange juice. Fortunately, there's Montero, which opened as a longshoremen's bar in Brooklyn Heights in 1939. On a recent Tuesday, the bartender (theatre major, kohl-rimmed eyes) pointed to the rows of liquor bottles behind her, some dusty, some new. "I've got a hundred and eighty bottles back here that haven't been cleaned out," she said. She cracked open a beer called Estrella Galicia, noting that the bar's owner hails from Galicia, Spain. "Pepe," she said, pointing to his photo on the wall. He inherited Montero—which in the fifties opened at 8:30 A.M. to meet dockworkers' demands—from his father. Two men, one in Carhartts, the other in a gray suit, listened as the bartender told a story about circumventing a large, slobbery dog, before she was interrupted: an upstairs neighbor had come down to collect her mail and wanted her to start from the beginning. Orange buoys dangled from the ceiling, and a pool table floated like a small island in the back room. On Saturdays, that table is surrounded by people, many of whom are singing along with the karaoke machine louder than whoever happens to be at the microphone. But on Tuesdays the bar is quiet, with the television set turned low, so that patrons can hear the bartender's stories, the way an old lady wants it. —Jeanie Riess



A person wearing a dark jacket, a cap, and a red and black backpack is riding a bicycle away from the camera down a narrow street. The street is lined with brick buildings. On the left, there is a large, colorful mural featuring a stylized figure and various patterns. The street leads towards a vanishing point in the distance.

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# DISCOVER A CULTURE OF COOL THIS SPRING

The nation's capital is an arts and culture hub throughout the year, but spring brings an extra flair. Find cutting-edge museum exhibits, dazzling stage performances and concerts at illustrious venues. One-of-a-kind celebrations are also ideal reasons to visit, like the National Cherry Blossom Festival and Passport DC, embassy tours included. Below, find just a few of the offerings that await you only in the District this season.





AMERICANS EXHIBIT  
Photo Credit AP Paul Morigi

## MUSEUM MARVELS

The Renwick Gallery's *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* (March 30 – Jan. 21, 2019) will feature installations from the desert gathering both inside the museum and throughout the surrounding Golden Triangle neighborhood, the first time that the Renwick has extended beyond its walls. *Do Ho Suh: Almost Home* (March 16 – Aug. 5) will display the artist's brightly colored fabric sculptures. Explore how 36 women artists interpret the concept of the home in *Women House* at the National Museum of Women in the Arts through May 28. At the National Museum of the American Indian, discover the influence of Native Americans on contemporary American culture in the newly opened *Americans* exhibit.

## THRILLING THEATER PERFORMANCES

Historic Ford's Theatre is home to the Tony-winning musical *The Wiz*, a beautiful retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, through May 12. See Shakespeare in an entirely new light when you check out *The Improvised Shakespeare Company* at the Kennedy Center (April 5-8). Dedicated to American plays and artists, Arena Stage hosts playwright August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* (March 30 – April 29), as well as world premiere musical *Snow Child* (April 13 – May 20). Samuel Beckett's classic exploration of the absurd, *Waiting for Godot*, comes to Shakespeare Theatre Company's Lansburgh Theatre from April 17 – May 20.



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# Renwick Gallery

Smithsonian American Art Museum



## No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man

Opens March 30

A take-over of the entire Renwick Gallery building, extending to the surrounding neighborhood.

The exhibition has been organized in close collaboration with Burning Man Project, a nonprofit public benefit corporation.

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FoldHaus, *Shrumpfen Lumen*, 2016. FoldHaus Art Collective. Photo by Rene Smith



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## DO HO SUH ALMOST HOME

March 16–August 5

Explore ideas of home and identity through Do Ho Suh's immersive, dreamlike art.

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Do Ho Suh, *Hub-01*, Ground Floor, Union Wharf, 23 Wenlock Road, London N1 7SB, UK; *Hub*, Main Entrance, 348 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011, USA; *Hub*, 3rd Floor, Union Wharf, 23 Wenlock Road, London N1 7ST, UK, 2016, polyester fabric and stainless steel armature. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong





THE ANTHEM

## SPRING SOUNDS

Capital One Arena welcomes musical royalty in the form of P!nk (April 16-17) and Bon Jovi (May 14), a recent inductee to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The 9:30 Club presents the indie-pop inventiveness of Panda Bear (May 7) and Tune-Yards (May 21). At The Anthem, DC's new venue at The Wharf, you can check out an array of styles, including the legendary hip-hop wordplay of Black Star (April 20), the chart-topping songs of Haim (May 1), the zaniness of David Byrne (May 12), the swagger of Big Sean (May 15) and the folk rock of Fleet Foxes (May 18).

## CULTURAL FESTIVITIES

The National Cherry Blossom Festival (March 20 - April 15) is DC's signature springtime celebration. Highlights include the Opening Ceremony at the Warner Theatre (March 24), the Blossom Kite Festival on the Washington Monument grounds (March 31), Petalpalooza, which will light up the new Wharf development with fireworks (April 7), and the National Cherry Blossom Festival Parade presented by Events DC (April 14). Passport DC (May 1-31) celebrates international cultures with two chances to tour an embassy for free: the Around the World Embassy Tour (May 5) and Shortcut to Europe (May 12).

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Photo of Ines Nassara by Scott Suchman





## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT GUN SHOTS

Is this the moment when the politics of guns shifts? Since the fatal shooting of seventeen students and staff members last month at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Florida, advocates of stricter gun laws have been asking that question, with the wary hopefulness of people who, time and again, have seen such turning points lead nowhere. This moment does feel different, though, largely because the teen-age survivors of the Parkland shooting have commanded the national stage with their raw and righteous indignation.

Last week, they got a real response, though so far it has come more from businesses than from elected representatives. The nationwide sporting-goods chain Dick's announced that it would no longer carry assault-style rifles or high-capacity magazines, and would not sell guns to people under the age of twenty-one, regardless of local laws. The company's C.E.O., Edward Stack, told the *Times*, "We love these kids and their rallying cry 'Enough is enough.' It got to us." By the end of the week, Kroger and Walmart had said that their stores, too, would no longer sell guns to customers younger than twenty-one.

Meanwhile, President Trump startled senators and representatives in a meeting at the White House last Wednesday by telling them that he wanted to revive a bill mandating universal background checks for gun buyers, chiding them for being frightened

of the N.R.A., and saying that, in some situations, he was in favor of taking people's guns away first, and asking questions later. This was particularly outlandish, given his ties to the N.R.A. and his enthusiasm for arming schoolteachers, not to mention the fact that, a day later, he was back tweeting "Good (Great) meeting tonight at the Oval Office with the NRA!"

But his remarks matter, anyway. The primitive sensors by which Donald Trump divides the world into winners and losers were telling him that for now, at least, the proponents of unfettered gun rights smell like losers. According to a Politico/Morning Consult poll conducted last week, eighty-eight per cent of Americans now support universal background checks, eighty-one per cent think that a person should be at least twenty-one in order to buy a gun, seventy per cent endorse a ban on high-capacity magazines, and sixty-

eight per cent support a ban on assault-style weapons.

Still, gun-control advocates might not want to place too much hope in any single moment, even this one. They will have to play a long game, made up of many moments. That's what their opponents have done. Matthew Lacombe, a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University, has been analyzing the N.R.A.'s rhetoric over the decades in editorials and letters to the editor that have appeared in its magazine, *The American Rifleman*. The organization's leaders and members used a remarkably consistent series of words to describe their identity: "law-abiding," "peaceable," "patriotic," "freedom-loving," and "average citizens." Their opponents were "un-American," "tyrannical," "Communist," and "elitist." Wayne LaPierre, the president of the N.R.A., echoed this language in a speech last week at the Conservative Political Action Committee, invoking a Democratic Party "infested with saboteurs who don't believe in capitalism, don't believe in the Constitution, don't believe in our freedom, and don't believe in America as we know it."

The N.R.A. has been honing its message since the nineteen-thirties, when it first became visible on the national scene, fighting federal legislation that mandated an early gun-registration and dealer-licensing system. "By the time the bill emerged from the lawmaking process," the political scientist Carol Skalnik Leff and the historian Mark Leff write, it had been "gutted—stripped of its handgun clauses and revised in



line with the objections of the National Rifle Association.”

The N.R.A.’s advantage isn’t only its ability to donate to candidates or to pay for expensive lobbyists and ads, though that is formidable. It spent four hundred and nineteen million dollars in the 2016 election cycle, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, which reports that “career NRA support for some members of the 115th Congress now reaches well into the seven-figure range.” It spent more than thirty million dollars supporting Trump’s campaign.

But the organization also benefits from its unequivocal rejection of virtually all gun regulations, and from the way that certainty resonates. Most gun owners are not N.R.A. members, but, according to Gallup, people who want lenient gun laws are significantly more likely to be single-issue voters than those who want stricter laws. Gun owners are also more likely than non-gun owners to have con-

tacted a public official about gun policy.

All kinds of people own guns, for all kinds of reasons. Still, some demographic features of gun ownership tend to reinforce a particular political posture. A 2017 Pew Research Center study found that forty-eight per cent of white men own a gun, compared with twenty-five per cent of white women, twenty-five per cent of non-white men, and sixteen per cent of non-white women. Gun owners are far more likely to live in rural areas. Forty-one per cent of whites with a bachelor’s degree are gun owners, versus twenty-six per cent of whites with a more advanced degree. Half of all gun owners say that ownership is essential to their identity.

Fear is a factor: nearly half of male gun owners and almost a third of female owners say that they have a loaded gun “easily accessible to them at all times at home.” According to the Pew study, “There is a significant link between owning a gun for protection and percep-

tions of whether the world broadly speaking has become more dangerous.” Jennifer Carlson, a sociologist who interviewed male gun owners in Michigan, found that many of them considered firearms crucial to reclaiming a sense of purpose, especially if they were no longer breadwinners.

Security, nostalgia for an era of unchallenged privilege, a sense of beleaguered white masculinity: these are powerful forces. They helped get Donald Trump elected. Advocacy for gun-control laws may never provide the same single-minded identity that politicized gun ownership seems to exert. But this year, again thanks in part to the Parkland students, it’s beginning to take a stronger hold. People who want this moment to mean something should remember that they are the majority, and that they, too, can choose, for however long it takes, to be single-issue voters.

—Margaret Talbot

## DEPT. OF DEVOTION YOUNG AMERICAN



**T**rixie Madell, nine, of Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, has been a David Bowie fan since she was three. Her parents, Dawn and Josh Madell, are rock enthusiasts—she’s a music supervisor, he co-owned the record store Other Music—if not particular Bowie devotees. For Trixie’s third birthday, Dawn made her a CD with Bowie’s 1967 song “The Laughing Gnome” on it. (“Ha ha ha, hee hee hee, I’m the laughing gnome and you can’t catch me.”) Trixie became obsessed. “I thought ‘The Laughing Gnome’ was his only song,” she said last Wednesday. It wasn’t. Dawn played her “Let’s Dance,” which didn’t quite take, and some seventies Bowie, which did. At four, Trixie dressed as Bowie for Halloween; at seven, she met D. A. Pennebaker at an outdoor screening of a favorite film, “Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars”; that same year, she had a Bowie-themed birthday party, with “Aladdin Sane” face painting, a lightning-bolt cake, and a

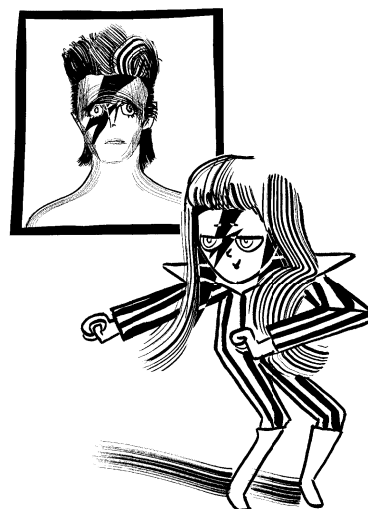
Bowie-shaped piñata filled with Mars bars and Starbursts, to evoke outer space. “We still have the head,” she said. Bowie fandom isn’t universal among seven-year-olds, Dawn said: at the face-painting station, “some of the kids were, like, ‘Why can’t I have a butterfly?’”

On Wednesday, Trixie and her mother went to a preview of “David Bowie Is,” at the Brooklyn Museum, a sprawling exhibition of Bowie art, music, film, costumes, stage props, handwritten lyrics, and other materials which originated at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2013, travelled to ten cities, and concludes in New York, where Bowie spent the last decades of his life. Trixie, who has outgrown two Bowie costumes and is collaborating on a third (“We went to Spandex World,” Dawn said), had dressed up: silver Doc Martens; silver sequinned pants; Bowie T-shirt and jacket; Ziggy-style astral sphere on her forehead, in eyeliner and gold dust.

The museum provides headphones, so that visitors can hear Bowie singing and speaking, synched to what they’re looking at. At the entrance, “Life on Mars” plays, and “BOWIE” is spelled out in lights above Kansai Yamamoto’s Kabuki-inspired “Tokyo Pop” patent-leather jumpsuit (1973), whose enormous teardrop-shaped legs jut out to each

side like a typewriter eraser. Trixie said, “I wanted that for my first costume, but it was way too hard to make.” For her birthday party, they had created a cardboard replica, into which guests could stick their head for photographs. She had worn a homemade version of a blue flame-covered catsuit, by Freddie Burretti, with asymmetrical legs.

Bowie’s early years are represented by a dioramalike display featuring an aerial view of his suburban bedroom, in Bromley, and recordings of Bowie talking about his youth: forcing himself to listen to Eric Dolphy records; forming an



*Trixie Madell*



organization, at seventeen, called the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Long-Haired Men.

Trixie made her way through the exhibition, admiring a photo of Earth that had helped inspire “Space Oddity” (“From the lunar orbit, not the moon landing”); the video for “Life on Mars” (“I’ve seen this a bajillion times”); a rigid, doll-like costume that Bowie wore on “Saturday Night Live” (“They had to carry him, because he couldn’t move”); a patterned zip-up number (“That’s ‘Oh, You Pretty Things’”); the crystal ball and sceptre from Jim Henson’s “Labyrinth” (“Mommy!”); the keys to Bowie’s Berlin apartment (“They look old”); playfully altered stills from “The Man Who Fell to Earth” (“They changed the bathtub water to tiles”); a suit that she correctly identified as being from Mick Rock’s “Pin Ups” photos; Bowie’s diary entry about writing “Fame” with John Lennon; a Pierrot mannequin (“Isn’t that the ‘Ashes to Ashes’ costume?”). She was uninterested in the “Blue Jean” display—Bowie’s post-seventies oeuvre is still of less appeal—and avoided the 1969 short “The Mask,” involving tights and white face paint. “She’s not fond of the mime phase,” Dawn said. At the display for “Blackstar,” Bowie’s final album, lauded by critics but not by Trixie, she politely pointed out an attractive pattern in the black stars.

A vitrine containing a suitcase-style circa-1974 EMS Synthi AKS analog synthesizer, however, given to Bowie by Brian Eno, elicited a cry of recognition. “There’s this animated video that tells about the making of—it begins with a ‘W,’” Trixie said. (“Warszawa,” on the 1977 album “Low.”) The video, an affectionate satire of brilliance and pretension, is by the Brothers McLeod. (It is not on display.) “It’s really funny,” Trixie said. She recited part of it: “Tony Visconti is, like, ‘Would you like me to put this through the Eventide Harmonizer? It fiddles with the fabric of time,’ and Bowie goes back to being Aladdin Sane.” Later, “he turns into a synthesizer.”

As they exited, Dawn kissed Trixie’s head.

“Why are you rubbing gold dust all over me?” Trixie said, squirming.

“Nine is a weird age,” Dawn said.

—Sarah Larson

## FLORIDA POSTCARD SIGN HERE



Last week, in Parkland, Florida, after classes had resumed and news trucks had left, two sixteen-year-old juniors at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School sat at a dining-room table, in a gated community, trying to launch a movement. Adam Buchwald, stroking a precocious five-o’clock shadow, pitched a visitor. “We want parents to sign a contract,” he said, “promising their kids that they’ll vote for leaders who put kids’ safety over guns.” The contract concept had occurred to Adam and his friend Zach Hibshman—who each knew two of the fourteen students killed at their school—in the Buchwalds’ den, where they’d been hunkering down since the shooting.

“Last Friday, we were just, like, ‘Let’s change the world,’” Zach, who was wearing gym clothes, said.

“Our classmates marched in Tallahassee, which we think is great,” Adam went on, referring to the #NeverAgain movement. “But our movement will make a major change in future elections.”

The teens had just returned from a half day back at school. “We aren’t doing any real classes this week,” Zach said. “No homework. We painted rocks in science.”

Adam added, “And ate good food.”

Adam and Zach have called their movement Parents Promise to Kids. An early version of their Web site solicited parental “promise keepers,” until someone told the two boys, who are Jewish, that there is a Christian men’s ministry by that name. The main point, in any case, was the contract. “We worked so many hours on wording,” Adam said. “My dad gave us input.”

“I’m not a lawyer,” Scott Buchwald, a salesman for the tech company Oracle, who was listening from across the room, chimed in.

“Granddad is a lawyer,” Adam said.

“I have two uncles who are lawyers,” Zach added.

“I’m just trying to help, as a father,” Scott went on. “I’m terrified of guns.”

“My dad keeps a bat under his bed,” Zach said. “No guns, either.”

The P.P.T.K. contract’s language is pretty loose. “That’s on purpose,” Zach explained. It consists of a single sentence: “I/We [parent name(s)] promise to [child name(s)] that I/We will vote for legislative leaders who support your children’s safety over guns!” More than a hundred contracts—from Florida to Idaho,” Adam said—had already been signed, photographed, uploaded, and hashtagged #PPTK.

“We need to broaden our ‘market,’” Adam went on, scrolling through photos on his computer. “So today we’re rolling out a contract for grandparents.” He and Zach, working their way through a bag of Sour Patch Kids, tweaked the new contract: Should it be “grandchild” or “grandchildren”? Did they need an apostrophe?

“O.K., I’m going to tweet this contract out,” Adam said, finally. After a moment, he added, “Do we need one for great-grandparents?”

“Someone wrote a message on Twitter,” Zach said, “saying we needed one for people who don’t have children. Who just have dogs and cats.”

Adam’s mother, Meredith, wandered in wearing tennis clothes. “Guys, is the Internet down?” she asked.

“No,” Adam said, without looking up. “We’re on it.”

Eighteen minutes later, a picture of a smiling elderly couple, identified as “Grandma and Grandpa Walzer,” appeared in the P.P.T.K. Facebook feed. They held up a signed contract.

“Crazy!” Adam and Zach yelled.

The boys had a list with twelve objectives for the afternoon. Among them: “Respond to e-mails,” and “Reach out to influential people,” which Adam’s dad had advised them to do. These have so far included classmates like David Hogg, an outspoken senior with four hundred thousand Twitter followers, who retweeted a picture of Adam and Scott holding up the first signed contract in their driveway, and Emma González (senior, 1.2 million followers, a friend of Zach’s sister), as well as the actress Alyssa Milano (“crush”). “Oprah didn’t answer,” Zach said.

P.P.T.K. already has a following. “One follower maybe D.M.s us too much,” Adam said, referring to an alumna of

the school. "Saying good morning and good night."

"She's got twelve thousand followers, though," Adam said.

"But zero engagement," Zach said.

"They're in the fire right now," Scott Buchwald said. "Some of the e-mails and tweets are shocking." He paraphrased one: "Fuck, no, I'd never sign this contract."

"Another one insulted our appearance," Zach said.

"Should we respond?" Adam asked.

"No," Zach said. "That'll encourage them."

Adam read an e-mail aloud: "Jesus Christ, this society is getting so fucking mentally weak."

Zach said, "How do you respond to that?"

Adam read another, from a parent saying, of his children, "Once they're old enough, I'll hope to bless them with the finest armament anyone can possibly manufacture."

The boys wrote back, "Thanks for voicing your opinion." But Adam decided not to sign off with his usual "Warmest regards."

—Charles Bethea

## DEPT. OF MOONLIGHTING PITHY



Jay McInerney, the novelist, who lives in a penthouse just off lower Fifth Avenue, recently took a car to Wonton Foods, in Bushwick, to discuss the experience of writing fortune cookies. He was wearing a beige turtleneck sweater, a long gray coat, and loafers. Looking out the car window, he said, "When my wife sees graffiti, as a former Upper East Side girl, she just thinks of urban blight." (His wife is Anne Hearst, a granddaughter of William Randolph Hearst.) "But I associate it with a period of great urban creativity." He added, "Basquiat once came to my apartment at one-thirty in the morning to sell me a painting, and, unfortunately, I didn't have what he considered enough."

In recent months, McInerney worked on a television adaptation of a trilogy of his novels; a memoir; and a set of eighty-eight New York-oriented fortune-cookie

fortunes, commissioned by the midtown branch of Hakkasan, an international chain of expensive Chinese restaurants. As his car exited the Williamsburg Bridge, McInerney quoted from this work, suggesting a special edition of Monopoly from the end of the last century. "If at first you don't succeed, try Botox," he said. "Your child will get into Episcopal. Your nanny is about to leave you for a family that lives at 740 Park. Beware of stock tips from strangers."

He reached Wonton's factory. Forklifts beeped. James Wong, an adviser to the company and formerly its senior vice-president of procurement, showed him to a small conference room, where McInerney took a seat beneath a framed photograph of a fortune cookie. Wonton dominates the national market in fortune cookies.

A few years ago, Donald Lau, Wonton's C.F.O., grew tired of the task of writing fortunes, and Wong reluctantly took over. "I kind of fell into the role," Wong told McInerney. "I do feel the pressure. I don't know how it is for you, but I'm constantly under pressure. I'm supposed to produce hundreds in a year, so every day I should be writing a few." He sighed. "But realistically it's not happening. We're trying to transition into using someone else. We're actively looking for other people to write for us."

He glanced at McInerney, who shook his head. "My fortunes are a little cynical for the mass market, I think," McInerney said. "More informal than yours. Your ex will be featured in a nasty item on Page Six."

"We couldn't publish that," Wong said. He asked McInerney if Hakkasan had given him guidelines.

"They didn't seem to want anything involving homeless people," he said.

"Oh, wow."

"I had one or two of those rejected."

Wong said that Wonton Foods made five million cookies a day. "Every day, millions of people read our messages," he said. "Donald always liked to claim that he's probably the biggest writer that nobody knows about."

"The Bible, Agatha Christie, and Donald," McInerney said.

Wonton has a database of hundreds of thousands of fortunes, going back more than thirty years, but, of these, only twelve thousand are thought suit-

able for current use. That number, Wong said, was too low. "The repeats—we definitely get complaints," he said. "We need to add more."

"You get complaints? Who complains?"

"Everybody!" Wong said, and laughed. "And all kinds of complaints. All kinds. They e-mail, they call. They threaten to sue."

"Oh, God, I hope I'm indemnified," McInerney said.

A woman had threatened legal action against Wonton after her husband opened a cookie and read, "Romance is in the air on your next trip." He was about to go away on business. "Romance is becoming taboo," Wong said.

"I wrote one: 'An attractive stranger's watching you from across the room,'" McInerney said.

"Oh, boy," Wong said. He went on, "There's a conscious effort here to move



Jay McInerney

away from being predictive. Because what can you write that doesn't offend people or doesn't make people mad? You can say you might win the lottery, and then it doesn't happen. Someone will blame you for it. So we're trying to be less predictive. More proverbs and advice."

"Advice! Advice I hadn't thought of," McInerney said. "The whole idea of not offending anybody strikes me as very difficult."

Wong said that, faced with the form's constraints, he had turned to writing fortunes that indirectly addressed his young daughter. "Hard work is a big theme for me, and taking on life's challenges, and facing them head on." He continued, "It's 'Don't be discouraged.' We are in pretty challenging times. I would never put into any fortune my political leanings, but I



do have political leanings. I'm a New Yorker, right? So you know which way I lean."

McInerney said that he wasn't sure he could find reason not to be discouraged.

"It's a little tough," Wong said.

—Ian Parker

## THE SPORTING SCENE ROCKS ON ICE



Every four years, patrons of the city's sports bars try to deduce the rules of curling—a sport that's been called "chess on ice"—by studying Olympic matches on wall-mounted TVs that they can't hear. Last month, the members of the Ardsley Curling Club, one of three dedicated facilities within an hour or so of the city, held a series of open houses for people who wanted to try to play. The club promoted the sessions, in part, with a video that appeared on pumps at area gas stations. More than six hundred people showed up—and that was before the U.S. men's team had bankrupted Canadian and Swedish bookies by winning the gold.

"The club was founded in 1932," Pam Politano, a member, said before one of the sessions. She was wearing a T-shirt from a curling tournament called the Maine-iac Bonspiel, and she'd come straight from work, at A+E Networks, in Manhattan. "I started fourteen years ago, at an open house like this one," she continued. "My daughter was five, and I thought I ought to be able to do something for myself." A couple of years later, her daughter began playing, too. "She almost went to college in Maryland, because that's one place where you can study marine biology and curl. She ended up in Florida instead, but she plays when she comes home."

Curling is harder and more exhausting than it appears to be on TV. One player slides a heavy, lozenge-shaped stone down an ice sheet toward a target, called the "house," and other players attempt to control the stone's velocity and path by fiercely scrubbing the ice in front of it with long-handled "brooms." "You're not officially curling until you fall down," one of the instructors said, consolingly, to the



*"I am in awe—after his daily toil, he still finds the energy to train for a marathon."*

second-youngest member of a family of four from Glen Rock, New Jersey.

A curling stone weighs forty pounds, plus or minus. Almost all the stones ever used in the Olympics, and most of the ones used everywhere else, including in Ardsley, have been made from granite quarried on Ailsa Craig, an uninhabited volcanic stump eight or nine miles off the coast of western Scotland. There's a famous golf course directly opposite, in Turnberry, and caddies there sometimes tell golfers that if they can see Ailsa Craig it's going to rain, and if they can't see Ailsa Craig it's raining already. The golf course, along with the resort it's a part of, was bought in 2014 by Donald Trump, and ever since then Ailsa Craig has been wreathed in the sulfurous black exhalations of Mordor. Or so it is said.

Aysha Williams, who teaches math to sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in New Rochelle, said, "I first saw curling on TV, maybe two or three Olympics ago, and I was just, like, 'What is this?'" She had come with a friend, Angela Pace, whom she knows from an adult basketball league. Both women played basketball in college, and Pace recently finished her sixth year as a professional, in Germany.

"There are still some things I haven't figured out," Pace said, after her lesson. "From end to end, the sheet is a lot longer than it seems on TV." She and Williams were sitting at a big round table in the club's "warm room," a loungelike area

with a bar, a fireplace, and terrific views of the ice. "We've always played basketball during the winter, so we never got into any other winter sports," Williams said. "But I like it." Both women were studying membership applications.

When Williams arrived at the club that evening, she was surprised to see Derek Kayser, a neighbor. Kayser, a retired building contractor, said later, "I coached Aysha in basketball when she was a kid. At that point, I'd quit curling, because my children were young, so she didn't know I played." He himself first curled when he was thirteen. "My father was a golfer, so he had nothing to do all winter," he said. "Then one day he came home, and he was ecstatic. He was shouting, 'I just found the greatest sport! These old men are throwing rocks on the ice!'"

Kayser returned to curling four or five years ago, after a twenty-year hiatus. "I did it because of my daughter," he said. "She'd joined AmeriCorps, and she was transferred up to Rochester. She told me she didn't know anybody—but there's a curling club up there. So she went, and all of a sudden she had, like, a hundred and fifty friends." He said that curling, in addition to being addictive, is like a fraternity, or a family, and that in high school he'd had friends at curling clubs all along the Eastern Seaboard. "As far as I'm concerned, everybody should be playing it," he said.

—David Owen

## HOME INVASION

*Infiltrating residences and decimating crops, the stinkbug keeps spreading.*

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ



One October night a few years back, Pam Stone was downstairs watching television with her partner, Paul Zimmerman, when it struck her that their house was unusually cold. Stone and Zimmerman live just outside Landrum, South Carolina, in an A-frame cabin; upstairs in their bedroom, French doors lead out to a raised deck. That week, autumn had finally descended on the Carolinas, killing off the mosquitoes and sending nighttime temperatures plummeting, and the previous evening the couple had opened those doors a crack to take advantage of the cool air. Now, sitting in front of the TV, Stone suddenly realized that

she'd left them open and went up to close them.

Zimmerman was still downstairs when he heard her scream. He sprinted up to join her, and the two of them stood in the doorway, aghast. Their bedroom walls were crawling with insects—not dozens of them but hundreds upon hundreds. Stone knew what they were, because she'd seen a few around the house earlier that year and eventually posted a picture of one on Facebook and asked what it was. That's a stinkbug, a chorus of people had told her—specifically, a brown marmorated stinkbug. Huh, Stone had thought at the time. Never heard of them. Now they were cover-

ing every visible surface of her bedroom.

"It was like a horror movie," Stone recalled. She and Zimmerman fetched two brooms and started sweeping down the walls. Pre-stinkbug crisis, the couple had been unwinding after work (she is an actress, comedian, and horse trainer; he is a horticulturist), and were notably underdressed, in tank tops and boxers, for undertaking a full-scale extermination. The stinkbugs, attracted to warmth, kept thwacking into their bodies as they worked. Stone and Zimmerman didn't dare kill them—the stink for which stinkbugs are named is released when you crush them—so they periodically threw the accumulated heaps back outside, only to realize that, every time they opened the doors to do so, more stinkbugs flew in. It took them forty-five minutes to clean the place, at which point, exhausted, they dropped into bed and switched off the lights.

Moments later, something went barrelling across the room, sounding, as stinkbugs do, like an angry and overweight wasp. The couple jumped up and turned the lights back on. Looking for the stray bug, Stone pulled a painting off the wall and turned it around; dozens of stinkbugs covered the back. She opened a drawer of the dresser: dozens more. That's when she and Zimmerman realized that they were going to have to treat their bedroom "like a hazmat situation." "We stripped everything," Stone said. They took the sheets and pillowcases off the bed and emptied the upstairs bathroom. They inspected the drapes by the doors and found hundreds more stinkbugs clinging to the folds. They thwacked off as many as they could, then took the drapes down to wash them. After that, they tried several more times to go to sleep, to no avail. "Literally, the instant it was dark," Stone said, "we'd hear four or five more come out and we would turn the lights back on because they were hitting the wall above our heads and dropping onto us, which was even more horrifying."

In the end, it took the couple almost all night to make their bedroom habitable, but since then they have never lived entirely free of stinkbugs. The day after the infestation, one flew out of Stone's hair dryer. A few days later, she pulled a hoodie over her head, then frantically yanked it off again upon discovering

*The brown marmorated stinkbug often congregates indoors in exorbitant numbers.*



multiple stinkbugs burrowed inside. Some time after that, she tacked up a horse she'd been training, jumped on, and immediately sprang back off: stinkbugs were pouring out of every crevice of the saddle. She has flicked them off the pages of books she was reading and pulled their corpses out of her jewelry box; they have crawled across the table during dinner and, drawn to the heat of the water, edged steadily closer to her in the bathtub. As she was telling me her story, one made its way across her cutting board, while another survived a swipe from her kitten.

Pam Stone's experience is not unique. Indeed, in the annals of brown marmorated stinkbug invasions, it isn't even all that extreme. The species is not native to this country, but in the years since it arrived it has spread to forty-three of the forty-eight continental United States, and—in patchwork, unpredictable, time-staggered ways—has overrun homes, gardens, and farms in one location after another. Four years before Stone's encounter, a wildlife biologist in Maryland decided to count all the brown marmorated stinkbugs he killed in his own home; he stopped the experiment after six months and twenty-six thousand two hundred and five stinkbugs. Around the same time, entomologists documented thirty thousand stinkbugs living in a shed in Virginia no bigger than an outhouse, and four thousand in a container the size of a breadbox. In West Virginia, bank employees arrived at work one day to find an exterior wall of the building covered in an estimated million stinkbugs.

What makes the brown marmorated stinkbug unique, though, is not just its tendency to congregate in extremely large numbers but the fact that it boasts a peculiar and unwelcome kind of versatility. Very few household pests destroy crops; fleas and bedbugs are nightmarish, but not if you're a field of corn. Conversely, very few agricultural pests pose a problem indoors; you'll seldom hear of people confronting a swarm of boll weevils in their bedroom. But the brown marmorated stinkbug has made a name for itself by simultaneously threatening millions of acres of American farmland and grossing out the occupants of millions of American homes. The saga of how it got here, what it's

doing here, and what we're doing about it is part dystopic and part tragicomic, part qualified success story and part cautionary tale. If you have never met its main character, I assure you: you will soon.

Of the five-thousand-odd species of stinkbug in the world, the brown marmorated kind is the most destructive, the most annoying, and possibly the ugliest. It is roughly the size of a dime, although thicker, but its head is unusually small, even for an insect, which gives it an appropriately thuggish look. Its six legs prop its shield-shaped body up in the air, as if they were pallbearers at the funeral of a Knight Templar. Its antennae are striped with bands of dark and light, while its eyes, should you get close enough to gaze into them, are the vivid red of an alarm clock at night. The "marmorated" in its name means "marbled," but "mottled" is closer to the truth. Entomologists, who have a color palette as elaborate as Benjamin Moore's, describe the underside of its body as "distinctly pale luteous" and the topside as "generally brownish cinereous, but also greyish ochraceous, ochraceous, testaceous, or castaneous." To everyone else, it looks as dull brown as its own frass, the technical term for insect excrement.

The defining ugliness of a stinkbug, however, is its stink. Olfactory defense mechanisms are not uncommon in nature: wolverines, anteaters, and polecats all have scent glands that produce an odor rivalling that of a skunk; bombardier beetles, when threatened, emit a foul-smelling chemical hot enough to burn human skin; vultures keep predators at bay by vomiting up the most recent bit of carrion they ate; honey badgers achieve the same effect by turning their anal pouch inside out. All these creatures produce a smell worse than the stinkbug's, but none of them do so in your home.

Slightly less noxious but vastly more pervasive, the smell of the brown marmorated stinkbug is often likened to that of cilantro, chiefly because the same chemical is present in both. In reality, stinkbugs smell like cilantro only in the way that rancid cilantro-mutton stew smells like cilantro, which is to say, they do not. Pam Stone compared their actual smell to the ammonia-and-sulfur

stench that suffuses the air outside paper mills. Others have likened it to everything from rotten fruit to filthy socks. A for effort. In fact, the smell produced by a stinkbug is dusty, fetid, lingering, and analogy-proof. A stinkbug smells, unhappily for us all, like a stinkbug.

Along with cheap yoga pants, mass layoffs, and the recent surge in nationalism, the brown marmorated stinkbug is a product of globalization. It is native to East Asia—mainly China, Taiwan, Japan, and North and South Korea—where, kept in check by various natural predators, it has coexisted with the rest of nature in relative tranquillity for millions of years. But then, on September 21, 1998, a gentleman from Allentown, Pennsylvania, deposited several specimens of a mystery insect in the office of Karen Bernhard, an entomologist who works at Pennsylvania State University's Extension Service.

Bernhard could not immediately identify the specimens, which was not in itself surprising. In both number and variety, insects dwarf all other animals; worldwide, there are some nine hundred thousand known species, while between two million and thirty million more have yet to be catalogued. (By comparison, there are just over five thousand species of mammal.) Since the United States boasts ninety-one thousand of those named insect species, some of them quite rare, plus almost as many unknown ones, it isn't that unusual to come across a stumper. Eagle-eyed 4-H'ers have been known to go bug collecting and come home with an insect that no one in the county has seen before.

It is unusual, however, to find an insect that no one in the *country* has seen before. At first, when Bernhard sent her specimens off for identification, she was told that they were a native stinkbug, *Euschistus servus*, but something seemed off. Although those bugs do sometimes make their way indoors, they are not normally household pests, yet all the people calling Bernhard were asking about insects they had found in their homes. In the fall of 2001, armed with a new batch of identical specimens, she contacted Richard Hoebeke, an entomologist specializing in invasive species, who was then at Cornell and is now at the University of Georgia. Within weeks, Hoebeke had determined that

the specimens were brown marmorated stinkbugs, the first ever identified in the Western Hemisphere.

Not long afterward, Hoebeke travelled to Pennsylvania to see the new species in situ. "It's kind of burned into my memory," he said. Hoebeke had seen plenty of stinkbugs in his time, but never in such quantities. "They were flying everywhere—in the air, around people's window screens, everywhere. I had my windows open, and so many were getting in my car that I had to be really careful that I wasn't going to transport them back with me. I was utterly amazed at the numbers." By their sheer quantity, it was clear to him that brown marmorated stinkbugs had been in the area longer than scientists knew. Together with some colleagues, he began scouring records like those kept by Bernhard and eventually determined that the first verifiable specimen appeared in Allentown in 1996, most likely via a shipping pallet from China.

That was the beginning of the grand American journey of the brown marmorated stinkbug. The first sighting outside Pennsylvania came in 1999, in New Jersey. By 2003, stinkbugs had arrived in Maryland. By 2004, they were in West Virginia and Delaware. By 2007, they were in Ohio and New York. These days, it's considerably easier to name the states where, for now, stinkbugs *haven't* been found: Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and Alaska. (That's before we even get to their global reach. In the past few decades, the brown marmorated stinkbug has also migrated to Canada, Chile, Bulgaria, Russia, Georgia, Abkhazia, Serbia, Romania, Hungary, Greece, Switzerland, Spain, Italy, and France, where it is known as the Devil's thumbtack.)

Needless to say, stinkbugs didn't arrive in these places under their own steam; indeed, as insects go they are unexceptional fliers, averaging a mile and a half a day. (Scientists know this because they glued seven hundred and thirty-seven brown marmorated stinkbugs to tiny treadmills, or flight mills, and tracked how far they flew.) However, as Richard Hoebeke learned first hand, they are impressively resourceful hitchhikers—or, really, stowaways, crossing state lines concealed in automobiles (inside, outside, crammed in the rubber sealing in be-

tween), tractor-trailers, freight containers, overhead compartments, and anything else that moves. Biologists have arrived at stinkbug conferences in distant states only to open their suitcases and watch in horror as one crawled out.

For the most part, though, the arrival of the brown marmorated stinkbug in a new place is an understated affair. Like a dance party that technically starts at nine but doesn't really get going until one in the morning, there's a long lag between when stinkbugs show up in a new place and when their population booms. Maryland had a stinkbug annus horribilis in 2010, seven years after the first one was documented there. Virginia's mass infestation, in 2011, likewise took place seven years after the first sighting in that state. Pam Stone's home was overrun in 2015, four years after the brown marmorated stinkbug was spotted in South Carolina.

Although concentrated urban areas like Manhattan have, heaven knows, problems of their own—bedbugs, subway rats, cockroaches so big they could register for kindergarten—they are seldom the target of large-scale stinkbug invasions. But smaller cities, towns, suburbs, exurbs, and rural areas all strike stinkbugs as prime real estate, because they enable the bugs to do what they do best. In the fall, winter, and spring, brown marmorated stinkbugs take up residence in private homes, sometimes by the tens of thousands. Then, in the summer, they quietly let themselves back outside, into nearby gardens, orchards, woods, and farms, and steadily set about destroying them.

**Y**ou wouldn't necessarily notice from the food chain, but it isn't particularly easy to eat a plant. Like most living things, they have evolved an impressive array of defense mechanisms to avoid becoming dinner: thick bark, tough leaves, thorns, spines, poisons. In turn, aspiring plant-eaters have had to evolve ways around those defenses—long bills to access difficult-to-reach nectar, for example, or metabolic pathways that allow them to safely ingest certain toxins. Because of these adaptive pressures, most herbivorous insects are specialists: they are very good at eating a small number of things. Thus, the emerald ash borer feeds exclusively on ash trees, and the Douglas-fir beetle,

as its name suggests, prefers Douglas firs.

The brown marmorated stinkbug is not like this. It is, instead, a generalist par excellence; entomologists call it "highly polyphagous," meaning that it will eat a stunning range of things. For instance, it, too, will eat ash trees. But it will also eat birch trees, juniper trees, cherry trees, tulip trees, maple trees (fifteen different kinds, including sugar maples, big-leaf maples, and vine maples), buckeyes, dogwoods, horse chestnuts, black walnuts, myrtles, magnolias, willows, sycamores, hemlocks, elms, and oaks. That is just a sampling, of just the trees. In other domains, it will eat a lot of things you probably eat, too: broccoli, asparagus, tomatoes, eggplants, okra, chard, cabbage, collards, bell peppers, cucumbers. It will eat pecans and hazelnuts. It will eat hops and grapes. It will eat apples and pears, raspberries and blackberries, apricots and peaches and nectarines. It will eat, like a medieval princeling, figs and quinces. It will eat, without apparent discomfort, horseradish and cayenne pepper, habaneros and jalapeños.

All of that amounts to just the hors d'oeuvres. So far, scientists have discovered more than two hundred and fifty plants that the brown marmorated stinkbug will consume. Together, those plants represent every major agricultural and horticultural sector of the American economy: vegetables, fruit trees, berries, nuts, ornamental plants, and row crops, including sweet corn, cotton, soybeans, and virtually every other legume.

What makes the brown marmorated stinkbug so impressively omnivorous is also what makes it a bug. Technically speaking, bugs are not synonymous with insects but are a subset of them: those which possess mouthparts that pierce and suck (as opposed to, say, caterpillars and termites, whose mouths are built, like ours, to chew). Yet even among those insects which share its basic physiology, the stinkbug is an outlier; Michael Raupp, an entomologist at the University of Maryland, described its host range as "huge, huge, wildly huge. You're right up there now with the big guys, with gypsy moths and Japanese beetles."

Like those two infamous insects, the brown marmorated stinkbug presents a serious problem for American crops. In 2010, Tracy Leskey, an entomologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture,



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formed a task force dedicated to figuring out just *how* serious—that is, to studying the biology, ecology, and impact of the brown marmorated stinkbug, and to developing environmentally and economically sustainable strategies for managing it. At the time, the stinkbug had just reached outbreak levels in the Mid-Atlantic, and the results, Leskey said, were “far beyond anything I had experienced working in ag for twenty years. I wish I had a metric I could give you to tell you how many bugs were in people’s crops.” In orchards, they were crawling by the hundreds on every tree; so many had invaded corn and soybean fields that farmers had to turn on the windshield wipers in their combines while harvesting. Afterward, it wasn’t uncommon to find stinkbug damage on every single ear of corn.

In the years since then, stinkbug populations have simultaneously abated somewhat in their earliest haunts and expanded into countless new places across the country. Those fluctuations, combined with the sheer range of plants that stinkbugs eat, make it difficult to assess their economic impact. To further complicate matters, growers are not typically required to report losses and—outside of crop-insurance claims, inquiries organized by trade associations, or the rare congressional request—they seldom do so. As a consequence, there are no reliable estimates of over-all stinkbug damage to date. In 2010, federal scientists asked apple growers in the Mid-Atlantic to tally their losses; the resulting sum topped thirty-seven million dollars, in an industry whose annual profit in the region is less than two hundred million. That year, Pennsylvania peach growers lost almost half their crop to stinkbugs, a fifteen-million-dollar blow, while some in Maryland lost up to a hundred per cent. In New Jersey, which is the fourth-largest peach producer in the nation, losses ranged from sixty to ninety per cent of the harvest.

No one has quantified the total loss to sweet corn, soybeans, tomatoes, bell peppers, and green beans, but no one disputes that it is significant. And the toll will almost certainly rise as the stink-

bug takes up residence in other places. Michigan, the nation’s third-largest apple supplier, began to see damage to that crop by 2016, five years after the brown marmorated stinkbug appeared there. In California, South Carolina, and Georgia, where the majority of American peaches are grown, stinkbugs are a relatively new arrival, and how much damage they will do when and if they reach a critical mass in those places remains to be seen.



Already, though, the stinkbug has demonstrated a taste not only for Georgia’s peaches but also for its cotton. Out in Oregon and Washington, it has begun feeding on hazelnuts and berries. Last year, in California, it caused documented damage to the almond crop for the first time. Across the country, vineyards are facing a double threat, because brown marmorated stinkbugs eat both grapes and grapevines. Worse, they tend to migrate to the center of grape clusters late in the season, then get harvested along with them. According to one study, the threshold for detecting a flavor change in grape juice is twenty-five brown marmorated stinkbugs per thirty-five pounds of Concord grapes. On the plus side, or something, evidence suggests that fermentation makes it somewhat more difficult to notice the taste of crushed stinkbugs in wine.

In general, it’s often difficult to notice the damage done by stinkbugs, at least at first. Unlike, say, locusts, which simply raze entire fields, stinkbugs wreak their havoc insidiously. The injury they do to corn, for instance, is invisible until the ear is husked, at which point certain kernels—the ones into which a stinkbug stuck its pointy mouth—will reveal themselves to be sunken and brown, like the teeth of a witch. Similarly, stinkbugs suck the juice out of apples through nearly invisible punctures, leaving the exteriors Edenically enticing; only later, when the empty cells start to collapse, does the fruit begin to darken and dimple. The resulting scars, known as cat-facing, also appear on peaches, tomatoes, and other fruits. To add insult to injury, the sugary substance weeping from those wounds attracts other noxious insects, including yellow jackets.

These damaged crops can sometimes be salvaged for juice, but that’s a cold comfort to growers, because fruit loses as much as eighty to ninety per cent of its value when it’s downgraded from produce to processing. Moreover, stinkbug-affected crops are often rejected even for juicing, for reasons of taste: in addition to sucking some of the sweetness out of their target food, the insects emit an aggregation chemical while they’re eating it—essentially, an enthusiastic arthropod Yelp review, meant to encourage other stinkbugs to join them. That aggregation chemical, which is different from the stinkbug’s stink—in fact, it shares its basic structure with Chanel No. 5—lingers on the fruit and negatively affects the flavor of the resulting juice. (Some evidence suggests that this chemical can also cause a rash in humans, especially if it is concentrated through repeated exposure, as happens with harvesters.)

Sometimes, though, fruits from stinkbug-heavy areas are rejected by processors for a different reason: excessive pesticide use. All conventional growers use some form of chemical insect control, and, up to a certain level, the residue is deemed fine for human consumption. But growers in stinkbug-affected regions sometimes exceed those levels—because, as it turns out, the brown marmorated stinkbug is exceptionally hard to kill with pesticides. Peter Jentsch, an entomologist with Cornell University’s Hudson Valley research laboratory, calls it the Hummer of insects: a highly armored creature built to maximize its defensive capabilities. Its relatively long legs keep it perched above the surface of its food, which limits its exposure to pesticide applications. Similarly, it eats from the interior of plants, where, for obvious reasons, pesticides are not meant to penetrate. Theoretically, it could inhale a fatal chemical through small breathing pores along its abdomen, but so far the only ones that reliably knock it out are broad-spectrum compounds, which farmers prefer not to use, since they also kill beneficial species. A class of pesticides known as pyrethroids, which are used to control native stinkbugs, initially appeared to work just as well on the brown marmorated kind—until a day or two later, when more than a third of the ostensibly dead bugs rose up, Lazarus-like, and calmly



resumed the business of demolition.

But what is not fatal to a brown marmorated stinkbug is terrible for American farms, farmers, ecosystems, and consumers. According to Raupp, the arrival of the stinkbug in this country “basically reversed three decades of environmental and economic progress in terms of managing pests.” After a long and steady decline, pesticide use in some places shot up fourfold, as growers who had previously relied on infrequent treatments in conjunction with other pest-management strategies suddenly found themselves spraying weekly. Those high doses cut back on stinkbug damage, but they were far too time-intensive, chemical-intensive, and expensive to be sustainable. Since then, somewhat better strategies for coping with the problem have emerged, but, to date, the only force that reliably gets a brown marmorated stinkbug off a food source is one that poses a whole different kind of problem: the urge, at the end of summer, to go inside.

It is not that the brown marmorated stinkbug can't survive the winter outdoors. It has, after all, been in existence since long before the advent of human shelters, to say nothing of human beings, and it is perfectly capable of spending the season huddled beneath peeling bark or in the hollow insides of dead trees. But, given sufficient proximity to artificial structures, it will readily spend the cooler months inside instead.

It will come as some relief to homeowners to know that the stinkbug does not pass its time indoors reproducing. Female brown marmorated stinkbugs lay their eggs in the summer—twenty or thirty of them at a time, roughly once a week, for a lifetime average of two hundred and forty eggs. (As indiscriminating in matters reproductive as in matters gastronomic, the stinkbug will lay those eggs on the underside of pretty much any available leaf.) When they hatch four or five days later, the nymphs that emerge look something like ladybugs: smallish, roundish, reddish, with little black dashes on their backs. The nymphs then cycle through five life stages in as many weeks, shedding their skin each time. In as little as two weeks after entering the final phase, they themselves will have reached sexual maturity. In colder climates, that's that, but in warmer locations—or when

spring sets in earlier and summer lingers longer, as is currently happening all over the world owing to climate change—those mature stinkbugs can begin reproducing right away, yielding up to five new generations a year.

Eventually, though, cooler weather arrives, and all those adult stinkbugs begin looking for places to overwinter. Often enough, they simply come in through doorways, around which they tend to congregate in autumn, but they have dozens of other ways of entering: down chimneys, around utility pipes, underneath the flashing on roofs, beneath cracks in the siding, through the vents in air-conditioning units, via imperfectly sealed windows, in the gaps below door sweeps. Studies have shown that, despite their relative heft, stinkbugs can crawl through any crevice larger than seven millimetres, which means that, no matter how much caulk and weather-stripping and patience you possess, it is virtually impossible to stinkbug-proof a home.

After a stinkbug breaches a building and finds a spot it likes, others join it, apparently attracted by the same aggregation pheromone that the bug uses to summon its friends and relations to dinner. (Dismayingly, for homeowners, that pheromone remains detectable to other stinkbugs for up to a year.) Once additional stinkbugs start arriving, they will stick around until late spring, and can assemble not only in incredible numbers but with incredible density. The instinct to do so is known as thigmotaxis:

the tendency to move toward physical contact—in this case, not only with other stinkbugs but with almost any surface. Thigmotaxis is why stinkbugs are so often found between layers (beware the quilt left folded in a window seat) and underneath seemingly flat things (brace yourself before picking up that stack of newspapers beside the recycling bin). It is why Pam Stone found so many behind her paintings, and why Doug Inkley, the biologist who counted upward of twenty-six thousand stinkbugs in his home, could pull them out of his attic by the handful, like popcorn.

Overwintering stinkbugs also display another characteristic that determines where you are most likely to find them. They are negatively geotropic, meaning that—unlike the roots of plants, which are positively geotropic and extend toward the earth—they tend to move away from the ground. In other words, like millionaires, feudal lords, and goats, stinkbugs exhibit a preference for high places. That is why you are much more likely to find them on the upper levels of your home than on the first floor or in the basement (where, indeed, they are almost never seen). In 2014, scientists at Rutgers University studied the distribution of stinkbugs in undergraduate dorms, and found that the percentage of rooms with bugs in them steadily rose with elevation, from eleven per cent of rooms on the first floor of one dorm to almost seventy per cent on the top floor.

The most obvious characteristic of the overwintering stinkbug, however, is



*“Jer, I just feel so empty. Do you have any peanuts?”*

a deep, abiding lethargy. Once it settles down for the season, it enters a state known as diapause—a kind of insect hibernation, during which its metabolism slows to near-moribund conditions. It cannot mate or reproduce, it does not need to eat, and although it can still both crawl and fly, it performs each activity slowly and poorly. As a result of this torpor, stinkbugs remain mostly in place, so that even if thousands of them are living in your home, you will likely experience them less as a flood than as a constant, inescapable dribble. Like drunken partygoers periodically stumbling into the hallway to ask where the bathroom is, two half-asleep bugs will materialize on a door frame, a third will rest on the arm of a sofa, a fourth will pause in its exhausting journey across the floor. No sooner have you disposed of these and gone back to your life than you will find one perched on the corner of your computer screen or crouched atop a bar of soap.

It is also thanks to diapause that stinkbugs, indoors, seem inordinately graceless and impossibly dumb. But, as we all now know, being graceless and dumb is no obstacle to being powerful and horrifying. Although brown marmorated stinkbugs don't actively destroy structures as they do crops, their tendency to aggregate can cause costly problems, by clogging wells, pipes, and chimneys. (They can also prompt expensive though largely fruitless visits from exterminators, and motivate upgrades that might otherwise wait; Inkle, after his stinkbug invasion, spent ten thousand dollars on new windows.) Infested hotels and restaurants must incur the expense of getting stinkbugs out and then keeping them out, to say nothing of the reputational costs that befall hospitality businesses overrun by insects. Stinkbugs can also be pricey for companies that ship goods overseas; American car manufacturers, for instance, have to fumigate or heat products prior to exporting them to certain ports from stinkbug-prone areas. And stinkbugs can cost the owners of those cars a bundle, too, by blocking air-control valves and vent lines.

Mostly, though, the problem with stinkbugs indoors is not so much expense as disgust. Overwintering stinkbugs navigate like nine-year-olds in bumper cars, making as much noise as

possible and banging into everything in sight: walls, doors, windows, humans. Unlike household pests such as ants and fruit flies, they are not particularly drawn to food and drink; then again, as equal-opportunity invaders they aren't particularly *not* drawn to them, either. This has predictable but unfortunate consequences. One poor soul spooned up a stinkbug that had blended into her granola, putting her off fruit-and-nut cereals for life. Another discovered too late that a stinkbug had percolated in her coffeemaker, along with her morning brew. A third removed a turkey from the oven on Thanksgiving Day and discovered a cooked stinkbug at the bottom of the roasting pan. Other people have reported accidentally ingesting stinkbugs in, among other things, salads, berries, raisin bran, applesauce, and chili. By all accounts, the bugs release their stink upon being crunched, and taste pretty much the way they smell. (They are also occasionally eaten by household pets, though seldom twice. One of my cats recently ate two at once, and promptly vomited them up.)

A further perversity of stinkbugs in the home is that they are simultaneously extremely easy and extremely difficult to kill. On the one hand, in the face of mortal danger they do not have the sense, or the speed, to flee. On the other hand, dispatching them by any of the traditional methods—smashing, squashing, stepping on—means that, like good Christians, they will triumph even in death, in this case by leaving behind a malevolent olfactory ghost. Worse, they will die with the sublime stoicism of a soldier who knows that ten thousand of his compatriots are lined up behind him, ready to take his place.

If you want to avoid the stench while also eliminating the stinkbug, your options are limited. "I'm probably not the only one who's thought of burning their house down just to kill the stinkbugs," one Internet commenter observed. Another suggested trying miniature silver bullets, or tiny stakes driven through the heart. What you should definitely not bother trying is insecticides approved for interior use; in the home, as in the field, stinkbugs are relatively immune to chemical assault. You can flush them down the toilet, but that's a huge waste of water. You can vacuum them up, but the smell

will be noxious; also, if not disposed of immediately, stinkbugs have been known to crawl back out again. The experts recommend building a contraption out of an empty soda bottle, filling it with soapy water, and drowning the stinkbugs inside, but I am dubious. For one thing, I have personally pulled a load of clean clothes out of the washing machine and discovered a stinkbug at the bottom, alive. For another, those same experts suggest collecting stinkbugs in Ziploc baggies, then placing them in the freezer for several weeks until they expire—somewhere, I suppose, between the pint of ice cream and the frozen peas.

As yet, the story of the brown marmorated stinkbug has no ending, so it cannot be said to have a happy one. It does, however, have something like a silver lining. Raupp, who has been studying non-native species for forty-one years, called its arrival on our shores "one of the most productive incidents in the history of invasive pests in the United States." Because the stinkbug is, as he put it, "magnificent and dastardly," it has attracted an almost unprecedented level of scientific attention. It has spawned multimillion-dollar grants, dozens of master's degrees and Ph.D.s, and a huge collaborative partnership that includes the federal government, land-grant colleges, Ivy League universities, extension programs, environmental organizations, trade groups, small farmers, and agribusiness. "From a research perspective," Raupp said, "this was and continues to be one of the major drivers in the history of entomology in the United States."

Thanks to that intensive research, the brown marmorated stinkbug is much better understood today than it was twenty years ago—and therefore better managed. For instance, entomologists now know that the stinkbug is a perimeter pest; it preferentially feeds on the edges rather than the interior of orchards and fields, a fact that enables farmers and growers to concentrate pesticide use in smaller areas while still achieving much the same results. Scientists also now know a tremendous amount about the stinkbug's most fearsome enemy back home: the samurai wasp, which deposits its eggs inside those of the stinkbug, leaving its larvae to emerge and consume their host. In East Asia, the samurai wasp parasitizes



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between sixty and ninety per cent of brown marmorated stinkbug eggs, thereby almost single-handedly keeping its population under control.

Like the stinkbug, the samurai wasp arrived in the United States by accident, and a small number have lived here since at least 2014. Now, though, entomologists hope to breed and release it in sufficient quantities to curtail the stinkbug population. Their logic is compelling: the stinkbug poses a serious threat to billions of dollars of American agriculture, while the wasp, which is tiny and does not sting humans, destroys those bugs in huge quantities and, according to studies spanning more than a decade, appears to harm only one native beneficial species.

Nonetheless, it's impossible to contemplate this plan without worrying about the law of unintended consequences, which has governed the realm of introduced species before. The cane toad, brought to Australia to control the native greyback cane beetle, proved to be largely ineffective at that job but horribly effective at killing other native species (sometimes by eating them but mostly, because it is extremely poisonous, by being eaten). Today, the two hundred million cane toads in Australia constitute a pest far worse than the one they were meant to control. Similarly, the Asian multicolored ladybird beetle was introduced into the United States to control aphids; it did that, but it also displaced most native ladybird beetles and proved to be, like the stinkbug, a home invader.

Still, as Peter Jentsch points out, you have to pick your poison. Or more aptly, in the case of the stinkbug, you have to decide *whether* to pick the poison. Whatever problems the samurai wasp may cause in the United States, the current alternative for stemming stinkbug damage is extremely frequent applications of a broad-spectrum pesticide. To Jentsch, the biological control is the lesser of two evils.

It is also possible that other benign solutions will present themselves, or have already started to do so. Curiously, in places where stinkbug populations once boomed, they have recently subsided to less daunting levels. Some scientists suspect that certain native species, including the wheel bug and the corn spider, are beginning to take advantage of the

abundant new food source in town. Others think that temperature is playing a role, in both directions. There's reason to believe that stinkbugs fare poorly in winters when the temperature drops early and rapidly, as happened in North America during the polar vortex of 2013-14, after which stinkbug levels declined; there's also reason to believe that excessively warm summer weather can reduce the survival rate of stinkbug nymphs.

Many scientists, however, remain worried. Raupp compared the brown marmorated stinkbug to a slow-moving tsunami that began on the East Coast and will gradually engulf the rest of the country. "The folks out in the Midwest, the folks on the West Coast—they're going to face the same kind of economic loss that our folks did back here," he says. That is a reasonable fear. In California, the brown marmorated stinkbug has already been detected in thirty-six of fifty-eight counties. Meanwhile, laboratory studies have added two relevant foods to the long list of those it will eat: avocados and citrus fruit.

As far as Richard Hoebeke is concerned, the brown marmorated stinkbug already belongs on the shortlist of the most serious pests in the United States. Like Raupp, Hoebeke has a lifetime of experience with non-native species; in addition to being the first person to identify the brown marmorated stinkbug in the United States, he was the first to identify the Asian long-horned beetle and has extensively studied many other invasive insects as well. He is not sanguine about the likely efficacy of the samurai wasp, because he is not sanguine about any biological means of controlling the stinkbug. "The vast majority of non-native insects that have become established in the United States have not been well controlled by biocontrol efforts," he says. "I mean, look at gypsy moths. They've been an issue since the late eighteen-sixties, and we've been throwing biocontrol at it for years." Doing that is better than doing nothing, he conceded, but it is a far cry from actually succeeding.

If there is comfort to be had in any of this, it is that old, familiar refrain: things could be worse. As damaging as the brown marmorated stinkbug is to agriculture, it has nothing on the boll weevil, which cost American cotton farmers billions of dollars in its heyday,

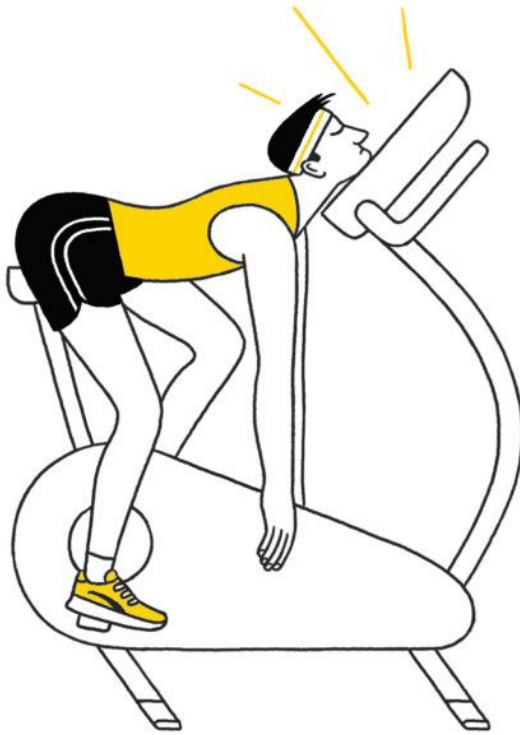
or on the Rocky Mountain locust, which, prior to becoming extinct, could sweep through in swarms the size of California and destroy millions of acres of crops within a matter of days. Likewise, as annoying as the stinkbug is in the home, it does not bite, sting, transmit disease, or gnaw through foundations.

In a way, then, we got off easy this time. The difficulty is that there will be a next time, and a time after that, and a time after that. Prior to the era of planetwide transportation networks, species routinely took millennia to establish themselves in new places. Today, thousands move around the world every day—by ship and plane and freight and pallet and packing crate, by business meetings in Switzerland and military deployments in Pakistan and tourism in Hawaii. At present, this vast influx of new species costs the United States about a hundred and twenty billion dollars a year and is, after habitat destruction, the main reason the world has lost so much biodiversity.

In that context, the arrival of the brown marmorated stinkbug is unremarkable. What's remarkable is how much we've done to address it—a reflection, I suspect, not only of how broadly it affects our lives but of how deeply it affects our psyches. Stinkbugs scuttle and crawl and amass like enemy armies; they have a prehistoric look and a post-mortem smell. They remind us that we are vastly outnumbered, that our walls are permeable, that we are vulnerable even in our own homes.

For most of us, as a result, the stinkbug is psychologically opposite from but politically identical to the polar bear. Like charismatic megafauna, revolting microfauna spurs us to action: we form committees, cough up funding, demand that something be done. The difficulty is what to do about everything in between those two biological extremes: the endangered Japanese night heron and the threatened lakeside daisy, the prairies lost, the wetlands lost, the glaciers lost, the species lost, the diminishing and despoiling of entire ecosystems. A stinkbug on your toothbrush or seven thousand in your attic is disgusting. Yet the most troubling thing about the natural world today is not all the things we have to live with. It is all the things we have to live without. ♦





## TV GUIDE FOR YOUR TIME AT THE GYM

BY ALEX WATT

**TV1 (above the treadmills), “The News” (NEWS):** Get your heart rate up with some of the most horrifying developments from around the world. Feel like running as fast as you can yet? No? Well, the anchors are about to sit down with another “dapper” member of the alt-right to discuss fidget spinners, memes, and, if there’s time, race relations. Go!

**TV2 (above the recumbent bikes), “Singing Competition” (MUSIC):** Amateurs from all over the country compete to become America’s next big recording artist by singing, presumably. It’s kind of hard to tell with the sound off. And, honestly, the closed captioning just makes things more confusing.

**TV3, TV5, TV6, TV8, TV9, TV10, TV13, TV15, TV18, TV19, TV20 (simulcast), “Just**

**a Black Screen” (MYSTERY):** Are these TVs broken or are they just turned off? How did they break? Why are they turned off? See the show that has the gym’s sullen front-desk employees shrugging.

**TV4 (above the elliptical machines), “Reruns of Your Favorite Nineties Sitcom” (COMEDY):** Break a sweat while cracking up and remembering a time when you still had a metabolism. Can you even call it “working out” when it feels so much like play? Try asking someone, because these machines will never be available for you to use.

**TV7 (above the spin bikes), “The News, but Pink for Some Reason” (NEWS):** No, you’re not about to faint, you’ve only been pedalling on this thing for forty-five seconds. This is the same news

program you can watch from the treadmills, but on this monitor everything is pink. Don’t bother pointing this out to the sullen front-desk employees, because they will just switch the screen off. Plus, Wolf Blitzer has never looked so full of life.

**TV11 (above the lone arm-bike machine, which you’ve only ever seen an elderly man wearing business clothes use), “R-Rated Sex Scenes” (MOVIE):** It’s not porn, but they’re really going at it. Whoa, that was the small of someone’s back! Wait a second—is this porn? No, Seth Rogen’s buddies are giving him a hard time for missing another “Weednesday” to hang with “some chick.”

**TV12 (above the stair-climber), “Just a Whole Bunch of Ads” (ADVERTISEMENT):** Want to buy this car? How about a different car? Cialis? O.K., get off this machine now. You look like you’re about to faint.

**TV14 (above the rowing machines), “Ray Liotta” (ACTOR):** All Ray Liotta, all the time. Could be “Goodfellas,” could be “Wild Hogs,” could be that police procedural he’s on with Jennifer Lopez. Will most definitely be interspersed with the tequila ad where he just stares at people intensely (not to be confused with “Goodfellas,” “Wild Hogs,” or that police procedural he’s on with Jennifer Lopez).

**TV17 (above nothing and facing the corner), “The Game” (SPORTS):** If you thought you could get a workout in while watching your team in another “meaningless”—according to the person you share your TV at home with—matchup against “the bird team,” you were wrong. Unless you count standing as a workout. And it sort of is, when you compare it to sitting. Plus, you’re not drinking beer. Better do some torso twists to really make sure you’re getting something out of it.

**Your Phone (wherever you want), “Whatever You Want” (ANYTHING):** Stream anything your heart desires using the gym’s free Wi-Fi. Until it stops working. If it ever worked to begin with. Hold on, the person next to you is watching something on his phone.

**Phone of the Person Next to You (to your left), “R-Rated Sex Scenes” (MOVIE):** Oops! This is straight-up porn. Quick—pretend you were watching some “Ray Liotta” from across the gym. ♦

LETTER FROM NINGXIA

# THE SPREADING VINE

*A Chinese region's winery boom is about more than just wine.*

BY JIAYANG FAN



The city of Yinchuan, in northwestern China, is the capital of Ningxia, a tiny lozenge of land that accounts for just half a per cent of China's population and a similarly tiny proportion of its landmass. Yinchuan's name means "silver river," and, according to local legend, the city owes its existence to a phoenix, known as the Bird of Happiness. A flock of these birds lived in southeastern China, bringing fertility to the land. One day, they heard about a wasteland, near the deserts of the Mongolian Plateau, whose people struggled to work the arid soil. Full of pity, one phoenix flew north to help, and soon flowers bloomed, crops thrived, and a city came

into being. But the good times did not last. The city was besieged by an enemy tribe and then fell under the sway of a corrupt official who eventually killed the phoenix. As it died, it made a final sacrifice, turning its blood into a canal that would irrigate the land forever.

"Now Yinchuan turns water into wine," Su Long told me on a sunny September morning, when he picked me up from my hotel in a hunter-green jeep. Su, a Yinchuan native in his late thirties, was taking me to the Chandon China winery, where he is the estate director. As we turned onto a broad boulevard, he gestured onto the buildings on either side. "About fifteen years ago, this was all farm-

land," he said. In the near distance, a high-rise came into view. "That's the government offices," he remarked. "Usually, the best-looking building in any Chinese city is the government building."

Two thousand years ago, Yinchuan lay on the Silk Road, along which goods and ideas travelled between China and Europe: silk went west, and wool, gold, and silver came east. In more recent history, Ningxia was a poverty-stricken coal region whose dusty scrubland was in danger of desertification. But, in the nineteen-nineties, the government began to invest seriously in its infrastructure, irrigating immense tracts of desert between the Yellow River and the Helan Mountains, much as the phoenix had done. A few years ago, local officials received a directive to build a "wine route" through the region, similar to Bordeaux's Route des Vins. European winegrowers, hired by the government as consultants, had identified Ningxia's continental climate, high altitude, dry air, and sandy, rocky soil as ideal for vineyards.

Wine is still a minority taste in China. Su told me that, when he decided to study viticulture, in the early aughts, it was scarcely recognized as a subject. He'd never even tried wine until he took classes with Li Hua, a professor who is generally considered the pioneer of modern Chinese wine production. "I didn't like it at all," Su recalled, screwing up his nose. For a moment, he'd suspected that the aura of sophistication that had first drawn him to wine was some sort of Western hoax. What's more, during Su's first tasting, his face turned scarlet, a reaction known as Asian flush, which affects about a third of all East Asians—myself included—and is caused by a deficiency of the enzyme that metabolizes alcohol. His professor wondered if he would survive in his chosen career.

We left the city and drove along the Helan Mountain Grape Culture Corridor, a wide, sinuous road that was recently laid to boost development and tourism. Billboards advertising various wineries—housed in faux-French châteaux, sleek modernist structures, giant pagodas—appeared, like fast-food signs along a highway. The road was lined with poplars, Scotch pines, and desert willows, and, beyond them, I could see the

*The Chinese government hopes that vineyards can help transform rural life.*



gray-blue ridge of the Helan Mountains. Su described the range as the primordial father of Yinchuan, which it shielded from Inner Mongolia's vast Tengger Desert, whose sandstorms would otherwise make agriculture impossible.

We soon pulled up to a courtyard dotted with honeysuckle. Chandon China's main building, a minimalist box constructed in 2013, had been painted yellow, to match the distinctive yellow silt of the Tengger. A young man named Liu drove me out to the vineyard to see the grapes being harvested. The temperature was in the high seventies, but the workers in the field—all women—wore long-sleeved shirts and had scarves wrapped around their heads, for protection against the sun. They squatted next to buckets, wielding shears with one hand and catching bunches of grapes in the other.

I crouched down, picked a grape, and popped it into my mouth. It was astonishingly sweet, less like fruit than like jam or sticky nectar. I smiled at a woman nearby, and the weathered skin around her eyes formed itself into deep grooves as she smiled back. Her dialect was hard to understand—what Chinese call *tu hua*, the language of the soil. She told me her name, Juhua, which means “chrysanthemum.” “Like the flower,” she said. “Except I was never pretty.”

Chrysanthemum was fifty-three, born in an impoverished mountainous region in the south of Ningxia, and for much of her life she had worked on her family's farm. About six years ago, she moved to the village where she now lives, as part of an extensive government resettlement program designed both to alleviate rural poverty and to stimulate growth in more economically productive population centers. When I asked her how life was here, she used an old peasant phrase I heard often in Ningxia, *kao tian chi fan*—to rely on the sky for food. She had left home at four that morning and waited in the village square for a ride to the vineyard. Liu told me that middle-aged, uneducated women like her were the least employable people in Yinchuan: “They don't have looks, they can't speak Mandarin, they have no skills.” It was why they accepted ten dollars a day for backbreaking work.

Liu introduced me to a neckless man with a meaty face, known as Boss Zhang,

who was contracted by the vineyard to recruit the workers and ferry them from their villages to the fields. For these services, he collected fifteen per cent of their daily wages, in addition to his own wage. The city government had recently named him a “model Yinchuan citizen,” and his picture had been in newspapers and on posters. He received the honor, Liu explained, “because he responsibly looks to the future.”

Zhang turned to me and began to hold forth on his vision of what he termed “the new countryside”: “When they used to live in the mountains and farmed for themselves, they determined their own schedule. As long as there was enough food to eat, there wasn't much incentive to work. But now it's a whole new world.” I asked whether relocation made people's lives harder, and he let out a brusque laugh. “Life is easier for the hardworking and enterprising,” he said. “Chinese society will no longer support the weak and lazy.”

I chatted more with the workers, most of whom were already grandmothers. Chrysanthemum told me that she had never tried wine and imagined that it would taste like Sprite, the one soft drink she liked. I asked her if she would ever be interested in trying the wine made from the grapes she'd harvested. She laughed and said, “Isn't the wine here very expensive?”

Liu answered that it cost a hundred and eighty-eight yuan a bottle—around thirty dollars.

Another woman nearby looked up. “That's three days' wages,” she marvelled, looking down at the grapes in her hand. Then she went back to work.

In the second century B.C., the Han-dynasty explorer Zhang Qian returned from modern-day Uzbekistan and brought with him tales of vines bearing giant clusters of grapes that made ethereal wine. Seeds from these vines were planted near the Imperial Palace, for the Emperor and his court, but wine remained an exotic novelty in China. Grain liquors, known as *baijiu*, have always been the national drink. In 1996, however, the conservative premier Li Peng toasted the National People's Congress with red wine, praising its health benefits and its contribution to “social ethics.” He condemned the excessive consumption of

*baijiu*, which was endemic in official and business circles, declaring it to be both unhealthy and a waste of resources. At a time when nearly ten per cent of the population was malnourished, twenty-five billion kilograms of grain were being used annually to make liquor. Li's speech had the effect of a political edict, and wine imports soared.

Suzanne Mustacich, the author of “Thirsty Dragon,” a book about wine in China, told me that the élite initially paid outlandishly for mediocre vintages, and often bought wine more for its value as a status symbol than for personal enjoyment. “Enthusiasm for the concept of wine outpaced concrete knowledge,” she said. Few people understood that Bordeaux was not a brand but the name of a region. Counterfeiters started obtaining empty bottles of expensive wine and filling them with plonk, and even created ersatz wine by mixing sugar water with artificial color and flavor. “Chinese people didn't really know what wine is supposed to taste like, so it was spectacularly easy to get away with,” she said.

Growing demand for wine in China—imports increased twenty-six thousand per cent in the first eleven years of this century—has prompted a surge in domestic production. China is now the seventh-largest producer of wine globally, and has more acreage devoted to vineyards than any other country besides Spain. There are a dozen or so Chinese wine-growing regions, of which Ningxia is the most significant. Ningxia now has around a hundred wineries, spread across a hundred miles, which, in 2016, produced a hundred and twenty million bottles' worth of wine. Most of this comes from large, state-backed enterprises, but the region's reputation is anchored by privately owned boutique operations, which have been accumulating international prizes.

So far, the wines produced are mostly Cabernet Sauvignons, Cabernet blends, and Chardonnays. The noted wine critic Jancis Robinson told me that she'd found the best ones to be “fully ripe, satisfying, well-balanced wines that seem to have some potential to age,” closer in style to French than Californian wine, something that may reflect the involvement of several French companies in Ningxia. She added, “I've never come

across such a determinedly wine-focussed local government,” and recalled how, when she visited in 2012, all the most senior officials involved in the wine region’s development insisted on meeting her.

The official most responsible for Ningxia’s predominance is Hao Linhai, who, before his retirement, in 2016, oversaw all wine production there for fifteen years, and was president of a government-backed organization called the International Federation of Vine and Wine of Helan Mountain’s East Foothill. Before taking the wine job, Hao, who moved to Yinchuan with his family as a child, had served as the city’s mayor and then as the deputy governor of Ningxia. I met him one evening in his office, a two-room suite in a high-rise, outfitted with boxing equipment, a telescope, and an imperial-style wooden throne. He drew me to the window and pointed out his house, which was on an island in the middle of a lake and had a boat docked alongside it.

Chinese government officials tend to be circumspect, but Hao, a trim man in his sixties, spoke with the freedom of someone accustomed to authority. “Here’s something you have to understand about the Chinese reality: everything is about being bigger and faster,” he said. “Quality and longevity of an industry are not priorities.” During his tenure, he tried to learn from the mistakes of Chinese wine regions that had expanded hastily, insisting on rigorous quality control and work-

ing to foster small wineries. It was a difficult tactic to maintain, given that officials are typically assessed according to their ability to fulfill quotas set in Beijing, but his seniority gave him latitude to do things his way. “I’ve been in the Ningxia government since the eighties,” he said. “I’ve had my hand at the wheel.”

Nonetheless, especially at the bulk end of the market, quality does sometimes suffer. Robinson told me that Ningxia’s industry is currently much better at turning grapes into wine than it is at growing the best possible grapes. As a result, she said, “the less good Ningxia reds tend to have a rather tart streak of underripe fruit to them—perhaps because yields are too high.” (A crucial task in viticulture is the rigorous pruning of vines, which reduces potential yields in order to get grapes with a concentrated flavor.) Part of the problem, a former wine-industry official named Rong Jian told me, is that large, government-run operations are often balancing quality against societal considerations. Now that crop prices, which used to be fixed by the government, are subject to market forces, some government wineries accommodate farmers by accepting all the grapes they harvest. “What do these farmers know or care about winemaking?” he said. “There’s clearly an incentive to haul in as much as possible, so how discriminating do you think they’re going to be?”

In 2005, Rong retired from his government job and co-founded a small

vineyard called Helan Qingxue, which produces just sixty thousand bottles a year and has emerged as one of the three or four best wineries in the region. “We manage the assembly line from start to finish, grape seeds to bottling,” he said proudly. He introduced me to one of his co-founders, Zhang Jing, who is in charge of wine production. Zhang, who has a round, bespectacled face and an effervescent manner, is one of a cadre of well-travelled, sophisticated women in their early forties who have become the most celebrated winemakers in the region. As she showed me around the winery’s fermentation and bottling equipment, she spoke of the time she’d spent learning her craft in the Rhône Valley. “When I saw the vineyards for the first time in Avignon, I forgot to breathe,” she said. The small scale of many of the châteaux contrasted with what she’d seen of Chinese wine production, and she knew that she wanted to emulate their ethos when she returned home. Like many Chinese vigneron who study in Europe, she was struck by the wealth of institutional knowledge that informed the winemaking traditions there. “The more I learned, the more ignorant I felt,” she said.

Zhang led me to a banquet room where four bottles had been set out: a Chardonnay, a rosé, a Cabernet Sauvignon, and a blend of Cabernet, Merlot, and Cabernet Gernischt (a name used in China for the varietal Carménère). Zhang mentioned that rosés were relatively new to the Chinese market; she suspected that they’d catch on, thanks to their juicelike color and clean, slightly sweet taste. It was a Cabernet blend, though, named Jia Bei Lan Grand Reserve, that had made the winery’s reputation, after its 2009 vintage won the top award in its category at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards, the biggest international competition. A 2014 Cabernet blend I tasted bore out what Robinson had said: medium-bodied and somewhat floral, it seemed like a Bordeaux. New wineries and new regions often announce themselves with wines full of fruity swagger, but Zhang had clearly avoided the temptation. The wine’s restraint was all the more impressive given that Chinese consumers are not generally thought to appreciate such subtlety. But Zhang told me she was confident



*“I was hoping to be rescued by a Marvel superhero.”*



that her strategy—making wine that was “dignified and complex but approachable”—would help change that. “Many Chinese people haven’t been exposed to it yet, but good wine is good wine,” she said. “The standard is universal.”

In Yinchuan, I found a burly man in his fifties named Liu who agreed to drive me around the countryside for a few days. When I asked him what wineries he knew, the first one he suggested was Chateau Changyu Moser XV. As we approached, I caught sight of a building that resembled the Cinderella castle at Disney’s Magic Kingdom. The chateau has stone towers with conical roofs, in imitation of the châteaux of the Loire Valley, and cherub-adorned fountains recalling the ones at the Boboli Gardens, in Florence. During my visit, men and women in rented tuxes and wedding gowns posed for photos in front of a colossal sculpture of a bunch of grapes. The theme-park appearance was not incidental: the government’s investment in the region aims not only to boost wine production but to turn Ningxia’s wineries into a major tourist destination.

Changyu Moser, which opened in 2013 and cost seventy million dollars to build, is the joint project of a long-established government-backed winery, Changyu, and Austria’s leading winemaker, Lenz Moser. A tour costs a hundred yuan, and for forty more you can harvest a pound of table grapes. Inside, pseudo-medieval halls contain exhibits that often have nothing to do with wine. The guide who showed me around told me that she’d had to stop taking visitors into a room containing 3-D murals of Pixar characters, such as Nemo the fish, because she could never get them to leave. At the end of the tour, there was a shop with souvenirs, including bottles of wine that could be branded with a label of one’s choice. One of the most popular labels featured a BMW emblem, under which were printed the words “Sheer Driving Pleasure.”

Ningxia’s emergence as a wine region is a source of national pride. While I was there, CCTV, the state broadcaster, was making a documentary celebrating its progress. It was to be shown during commercial breaks in the coverage of the Nineteenth Party Congress, in October, which established President Xi Jinping

as the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong. I caught up with the film crew at Silver Heights, probably the region’s most famous winery, which is run by Emma Gao, another of Ningxia’s female wine stars. The film’s producer, a woman in her thirties, was prepping Gao for an interview by showing her a previously filmed segment, in which another vigneron intoned propagandistic lines to the camera. “Increased capacity here means we can compete with superpowers like America,” he said. His delivery was so wooden that Gao asked who had coached him on his lines.

Insofar as most Chinese people think of Ningxia at all, it is as a place of deprivation and backwardness. The producer said, “Before I was sent here for my job, in 2013, I thought it was the kind of place where you rode camels to work.” She regarded overturning such preconceptions as a patriotic duty, and was proud of the fact that notable European winemakers were investing in the region. “For Silver Heights, we want to convey its internationalization,” she instructed Gao, who spent several years in France, becoming a certified enologist and working at a Bordeaux estate, and is married to a Frenchman.

“Well, here’s a reporter from New York,” Gao said, pointing to me.

The producer smiled politely in my direction, but then frowned. “Right,” she said. “But we want someone who communicates that instantly on camera, you see.” She didn’t need to elaborate, but she did: “An *authentic* foreigner.”

Although Ningxia, administratively speaking, operates like a province, it is one of China’s autonomous regions, and a third of its population is Hui, one of China’s officially recognized ethnic minorities. A Muslim people partly descended from Central Asian, Persian, and Arab traders who travelled along the Silk Road, the Hui have, for generations, lived mostly as subsistence farmers in Ningxia’s inhospitable mountain regions. Their land is increasingly threatened by climate change, and they make up the majority of the nearly 1.2 million people in rural Ningxia who have been resettled by the government.

The owner of a winery called Lilan took me to see a new Hui village where most of his workers live. Built in 2012,

Yuanlong Relocation Village looked like an Asian Levittown: clean, straight streets of low-slung houses with pagoda roofs and minaret-shaped gateposts topped with crescent moons. There was a school, a marketplace, several mosques, and a park for the village’s twenty-eight hundred families to play and exercise in. I visited the village’s Party chief, Hai Guobao, who lived with his wife and the family of one of his sons in a traditional courtyard house. Dressed in the white tunic and skullcap typically worn by Hui men, he was tending vegetables in his garden when we arrived.

“Didn’t I see a Mercedes-Benz in your driveway?” the winery owner asked teasingly. The shiny car we’d seen outside was actually Chinese-made, but Hai admitted that life had improved since his family moved here, from a farm at the foot of the Liupan Mountains, some three hundred miles to the south. “There, what we harvested, we ate,” he said. He took us inside and pointed to an enormous photograph, in a gilded frame, that filled a wall of the living room. “The Chairman visited us last year,” he said, with reverence. In the picture, President Xi, who toured Ningxia in 2016, sat on a couch, surrounded by Hai and his family.

Xi’s visit was one in a series he has made to promote the development of China’s remotest and poorest regions. He has declared that a war on poverty will be a priority of his second term, and has pledged to move a hundred million rural residents into cities by 2020. Party officials believe that urbanization will raise the country’s standard of living, thus boosting domestic consumption and rebalancing China’s export-reliant economy. The government gives resettled Hui peasants plots of land, smaller than the farms they come from but closer to urban centers. The land on which Lilan’s grapes are grown is almost entirely rented from the Hui farmers of Yuanlong Village, who own it collectively.

Hai’s son and daughter-in-law entered with bowls of Hui cuisine: rough pancakes soaked in steaming mutton soup and side dishes of nuts and seeds and fried dough. The family served the winery owner and me as honored guests, and then looked on intently as we ate. I asked Hai if he was happy in the village or if he missed his old farm. He thought for

a second and said, “We have convenience, modern appliances, a better quality of life generally. That is happiness.” One of Hai’s grandchildren, a shy girl wearing a sparkly T-shirt with the word “Lovely” on it, came over and snuggled against her grandfather’s knee. I asked if I could take a picture, and Hai’s eyes widened: he had a better idea. “We’ll re-create it!” he said, and it took me a moment to realize that he meant the photograph with President Xi. Hai’s sons and grandchildren dutifully arranged themselves around him on the couch, and he motioned to me to sit in the spot where Xi had sat.

Hui people I met elsewhere were less sanguine about the resettlement scheme. One day, Liu, my driver, took me to a famous Hui market on the outskirts of Yinchuan. Row after row of stalls with bright awnings were piled high with coils of fried dough, freshly killed ducks, and huge sunflower blossoms. Banners bearing Quranic verses hung above an outdoor halal food court. Fruit and vegetable peddlers hawked their produce from three-wheeled electric carts.

Liu belongs to China’s ethnic majority, the Han, and offered his views on the Hui as he led me through the streets. They live in enclaves, socializing only among themselves, he said, and had arrived in the city in waves, starting in the nineteen-eighties. Back then, he thought of them as “uncivilized and filthy, like stray dogs.” On the other hand, he’d come to love Hui restaurants, finding the Hui to be great cooks and fastidious around food—“cleaner than us Han.”

His opinions seemed to be rooted less in animosity than in anxiety about his own life. “The Hui get more government assistance than us natives,” he complained. The government built apartments for resettled Hui, whereas he’d had to buy an apartment, after market reforms led to the termination of public-housing programs. In the late nineties, he’d started working on a state-owned farm just as the government began dismantling state-owned enterprises in order to foster competition. The feel of the city had changed, he said. It looked like a construction site, and was full of migrant workers from places like Shanxi and Inner Mongolia. Liu had been brought up an atheist

Communist, but he was familiar with Muslim rituals and customs. He told me that it was Eid al-Adha, the holiest days of the Islamic year, which are marked by animal sacrifices. “The rich Hui sacrifice cows, and the others make do with sheep, chickens, and ducks,” he explained, as we passed by a cow carcass dangling from a hook.

We entered the walled courtyard of a local mosque, simple and slightly derelict. A hunched man in a skullcap introduced himself as the imam. He was in his sixties and, like the Hui I met in the model village, came from the Liupan Mountains. Of everyone I met in Yinchuan, the imam spoke with the rawest emotion, not bothering to hide his anger with the government; it had taken him from his land and set him down in a place where there were no jobs he was qualified for. Although resettled families were given land, a place to live, and a cash subsidy, he said that everyone felt cheated. Farmers received only five to ten per cent of their old land’s value, and the subsidy for a family amounted to a hundred dollars a year—“hardly enough to live on.” The new government housing was shoddily constructed and cramped, and city living was making the younger generation less devout.

A young man had entered the courtyard on his bike, carrying the coarse, fleecy hide of a lamb that had just been ritually slaughtered. Remains of sacrificed animals are traditionally donated to char-



ity. The imam took the hide and shook his head: you couldn’t get much for a lambskin these days.

It was getting late. “We’ll see you again, hopefully,” Liu said, as a farewell. “Probably not in these parts,” the imam replied. A directive had come down for the Hui who had been resettled here to move yet again, in order to make way for a new phase of the city’s expansion. “For thirty years now, they have herded us from place to place,” the imam said,

shaking the bloodied hide in his hands. “Tell me, please, how am I different from this sheep?”

Some days, Liu brought along a friend and fellow-cabbie, whom he introduced simply as Fatty and who took over most of the driving. Both of them said that they enjoyed drinking and had no problems with Asian flush, but, like most of the ordinary Yinchuan people I spoke to, they had rarely drunk wine. Liu preferred the fiery taste of *baijiu* and liked that you could get drunk on it for twenty yuan. “Can you imagine how many bottles of fancy wine it would take to do the same job?” he asked. Fatty said that he had drunk wine just once, with a rich couple who were in the habit of consuming six hundred yuan’s worth a night.

“Yinchuan folks drink everything, especially Fatty,” Liu said.

“Not you, if you had married that Hui girl!” his friend replied with a devious smile.

Liu blushed. “It was a long time ago, and I would have needed to convert,” he said. “Imagine me giving up pork!”

Liu and Fatty told me that ferrying visitors to wineries was their most lucrative work, but they’d never been inside one, as it would have meant paying admission. They stayed in the car while I made my visits, and talking to them after my conversations with the winemakers brought into focus the oddly bifurcated nature of China’s modernization. The world inside—affluent, privileged, and cosmopolitan—was foreign to the two men. For them, Ningxia’s emergence as the Bordeaux of the East was a cause for excitement but also puzzlement. It must be a good thing, because it brought in money, but why people were willing to go to such effort and expense to produce something that didn’t even taste very good was a mystery.

One of the strange things about the speed of China’s transformation is how it heightens your awareness not only of dramatic changes but also of what doesn’t change. The government’s schemes, centrally planned and then implemented in province after province, can make fortunes, ruin lives, or leave social hierarchies much the same as they were before. I thought about the phrase the woman in the vineyard had used, about relying on the sky for food. The sky could



ripen your vines or ruin your crops and there was nothing you could do about it. Here the government was no different: a distant power inscrutable to those on the ground.

At a state-run winery named Xixia King, I snuck Liu and Fatty in for a tour. A guide boasted about the winery's achievements while showing us scale models of the topography of the Helan Mountains, dioramas of viticultural scenes from imperial times to the present, and a cigar hall. Liu and Fatty took pictures of everything with their phones. On a map of the region, with colored lights indicating the various wineries, they tried to pinpoint the locations of their homes, but couldn't find them. They were amazed by the prices of the bottles. One cost more than a thousand yuan, and they teased each other about how many days they'd have to drive in order to afford it.

The opulence of the winery made the men recall tougher times, once we were back on the road. Fatty, like Liu, had had his life upended by market reforms. He'd worked at a government-owned chemical factory, met his wife there, and assumed that he'd be there until retirement. But the factory closed six months after they got married.

"It was unimaginable at the time," Fatty said. "People jumped off buildings, drank poison, went to the sanitarium."

"Things were hard then, brother," Liu said.

"Do you remember those years when all the trees were bare? People who didn't have money to buy groceries would climb trees to pick leaves that they would take home to boil."

"Only after dark, though."

Fatty nodded. "The college grads. They couldn't bear the shame of it in the daylight."

We turned onto a narrow, gravelly road lined with cypresses. Liu told me that he needed to pick up something from a friend he'd known since his days as a farmworker, who was now a security guard at a new vineyard. The place looked run down, with withered vines and empty trellises. Liu's friend, a wiry man in his fifties, emerged from a shack, followed by several guard dogs. The estate belonged to a young couple, he told me, rich kids from a coastal city who were away for the season. They'd invested



*"Not so much fun being people-watched back, eh?"*

several million yuan to build a guest-house, but during construction the roof had collapsed. He said that, for every winery owner who succeeded, half a dozen invested lavishly but failed.

The guard was carrying two large plastic bottles sealed with Scotch Tape. Inside, dark-red liquid sloshed and frothed. Nobody would miss a few jugs, he said. He instructed Liu to take the tape off the top a little while before drinking the wine, having observed the way people at the winery uncorked bottles and then let them sit. The men started avidly discussing an open secret around the wineries: the burgeoning black market for wine. A few workers stay late, fill vegetable-oil containers with the dregs from winery tanks, and then sell them on the street for fifty yuan each. "Well, we are the proletariat, after all," the guard said. "What's wrong with skimming a little from the capitalist class?"

Being in possession of contraband wine put the men in a giddy mood, and, not long after we left, Fatty pulled over and Liu fetched one of the jugs of wine from the trunk. Having driven me to at least half a dozen wineries, they took me for an expert and were eager to get my opinion. As Liu produced some grimy plastic cups from the recesses of the car, I remembered a tasting at Silver Heights, where wines were daintily paired with

Camembert imported from Normandy, via Shanghai. The bootleg wine was warm, and, when I raised my cup, I could see thick sediment dancing inside. The security guard had mentioned that the wine hadn't yet been filtered, but Liu and Fatty didn't seem bothered. We took a sip, and Fatty's mouth puckered. The wine was harsh, sweet but astringent, and the taste seemed to register in the esophagus as much as in the mouth. As the men drained their cups, Liu reflected that at least it hadn't cost them anything.

We got back in the car. An expanse of yellow rape flowers appeared in the near distance, and the Helan range had a shadowy look, despite the mid-afternoon sun. The road rose slightly, and I saw that fifty feet away its surface simply gave out, with a drop of several feet to a rough track below. I shouted at Fatty to stop, and he shot me a perplexed look as he turned the car around. "It's a small thing," he said. With the current pace of construction and development, you couldn't expect all the roads to be finished. We made our way back to the main road, and I spied a fairyland castle the color of a robin's egg behind a copse of trees. As we passed the entrance, a pair of signs on the gateposts suggested that it could be called either "Ningxia Chteau Farsight Co., Ltd" or "Ningxia Chteau saint louis-ding." ♦

# THE MAN BEHIND THE DOSSIER

*How Christopher Steele compiled his secret report on Trump's ties with Russia.*

BY JANE MAYER

In January, after a long day at his London office, Christopher Steele, the former spy turned private investigator, was stepping off a commuter train in Farnham, where he lives, when one of his two phones rang. He'd been looking forward to dinner at home with his wife, and perhaps a glass of wine. It had been their dream to live in Farnham, a town in Surrey with a beautiful Georgian high street, where they could afford a house big enough to accommodate their four children, on nearly an acre of land. Steele, who is fifty-three, looked much like the other businessmen heading home, except for the fact that he kept his phones in a Faraday bag—a pouch, of military-tested double-grade fabric, designed to block signal detection.

A friend in Washington, D.C., was calling with bad news: two Republican senators, Lindsey Graham and Charles Grassley, had just referred Steele's name to the Department of Justice, for a possible criminal investigation. They were accusing Steele—the author of a secret dossier that helped trigger the current federal investigation into President Donald Trump's possible ties to Russia—of having lied to the very F.B.I. officers he'd alerted about his findings. The details of the criminal referral were classified, so Steele could not know the nature of the allegations, let alone rebut them, but they had something to do with his having misled the Bureau about contacts that he'd had with the press. For nearly thirty years, Steele had worked as a close ally of the United States, and he couldn't imagine why anyone would believe that he had been deceptive. But lying to an F.B.I. officer is a felony, an offense that can be punished by up to five years in prison.

The accusations would only increase doubts about Steele's reputation that had clung to him since BuzzFeed published the dossier, in January, 2017. The

dossier painted a damning picture of collusion between Trump and Russia, suggesting that his campaign had “accepted a regular flow of intelligence from the Kremlin, including on his Democratic and other political rivals.” It also alleged that Russian officials had been “cultivating” Trump as an asset for five years, and had obtained leverage over him, in part by recording videos of him while he engaged in compromising sexual acts, including consorting with Moscow prostitutes who, at his request, urinated on a bed.

In the spring of 2016, Orbis Business Intelligence—a small investigative-research firm that Steele and a partner had founded, in 2009, after leaving M.I.6, Britain's Secret Intelligence Service—had agreed to do opposition research on Trump's murky relationship with Russia. Under the arrangement, Orbis was a subcontractor working for Fusion GPS, a private research firm in Washington. Fusion, in turn, had been contracted by a law firm, Perkins Coie, which represented both Hillary Clinton's Presidential campaign and the Democratic National Committee. Several months after Steele signed the deal, he learned that, through this chain, his research was being jointly subsidized by the Clinton campaign and the D.N.C. In all, Steele was paid a hundred and sixty-eight thousand dollars for his work.

Steele had spent more than twenty years in M.I.6, most of it focussing on Russia. For three years, in the nineties, he spied in Moscow under diplomatic cover. Between 2006 and 2009, he ran the service's Russia desk, at its headquarters, in London. He was fluent in Russian, and widely considered to be an expert on the country. He'd also advised on nation-building in Iraq. As a British citizen, however, he was not especially knowledgeable about American politics. Peter Fritsch, a co-founder at Fusion who has worked closely with Steele, said

of him, “He's a career public-service officer, and in England civil servants haven't been drawn into politics in quite the same way they have here. He's a little naïve about the public square.”

And so Steele, on that January night, was stunned to learn that U.S. politicians were calling him a criminal. He told Christopher Burrows, with whom he co-founded Orbis, that the sensation was “a feeling like vertigo.” Burrows, in his first public interview on the dossier controversy, recalled Steele telling him, “You have this thudding headache—you can't think straight, you have no appetite, you feel ill.” Steele compared it to the disorientation that he had felt in 2009, when his first wife, Laura, had died, after a long illness, leaving him to care for their three young children.

That night, Burrows said, Steele and his second wife, Katherine, who have been married since 2012, sat in their living room, wondering what would become of them. Would they be financially ruined by legal costs? (In addition to the criminal referral in the U.S., a Russian businessman, Aleksey Gubarev, had filed a libel lawsuit against Steele, saying that the dossier had falsely accused his company of helping the Russian government hack into the Democratic Party's internal e-mail system.) Would Steele end up in a U.S. federal penitentiary? Would a Putin emissary knife him in a dark alley somewhere?

In conversations with friends, Steele said he hoped that in five years he'd look back and laugh at the whole experience. But he tended toward pessimism. No matter how the drama turned out, “I will take this to my grave,” he often predicted. A longtime friend of Steele's pointed out to me that Steele was in a singularly unenviable predicament. The dossier had infuriated both Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump by divulging allegedly corrupt dealings between them. “You've got oligarchs running both



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superpowers,” the friend said. “And, incredibly, they both hate this same guy.”

Legal experts soon assured Steele that the criminal referral was merely a political stunt. Nevertheless, it marked a tense new phase in the investigation into Trump’s alleged ties to Russia. The initial bipartisan support in Congress for a serious inquiry into foreign meddling in America’s democracy had given way to a partisan brawl. Trump’s defenders argued that Steele was not a whistleblower but a villain—a dishonest Clinton apparatchik who had collaborated with American intelligence and law-enforcement officials to fabricate false charges against Trump and his associates, in a dastardly attempt to nullify the 2016 election. According to this story line, it was not the President who needed to be investigated but the investigators themselves, starting with Steele. “They’re trying to take down the whole intelligence community!” Steele exclaimed one day to friends. “And they’re using me as the battering ram to do it.”

It was not the first time that a congressional investigation had been used as a tool for destroying someone’s reputation. Whenever a scandal hit Washington, opponents used subpoe-

nas, classified evidence, and theatrical public hearings to spread innuendo, confusion, and lies. Senators Grassley and Graham declined to be interviewed for this article, but in January Grassley, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, gave a speech on the Senate floor defending the criminal referral. He noted that Steele had drawn on Russian contacts to amass the dossier. “Who was *actually* colluding with Russians?” Grassley asked. “It’s becoming more clear.”

Democratic members of the committee, who had not been consulted by Republicans about the criminal referral against Steele, were enraged. The California senator Dianne Feinstein, the ranking minority member on the committee, declared that the Republicans’ goals were “undermining the F.B.I. and Special Counsel Mueller’s investigation” and “deflecting attention” from it. Feinstein said that the criminal referral provided no evidence that Steele had lied, and, she added, “not a single revelation in the Steele dossier has been refuted.”

Sheldon Whitehouse, a Democratic senator from Rhode Island, is a former prosecutor who also serves on the Judiciary Committee. “To impeach

Steele’s dossier is to impeach Mueller’s investigation,” he told me. “It’s to recast the focus back on Hillary.” The Republicans’ aim, he believed, was to “create a false narrative saying this is all a political witch hunt.”

Indeed, on January 18th, the staff of Devin Nunes, the Republican chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, produced a report purporting to show that the real conspiracy revolved around Hillary Clinton. “The truth,” Nunes said, is that Clinton “colluded with the Russians to get dirt on Trump, to feed it to the F.B.I. to open up an investigation into the other campaign.” Glenn Kessler, who writes the nonpartisan Fact Checker blog at the *Washington Post*, awarded Nunes’s statement four Pinocchios—his rating for an outright lie. “There is no evidence that Clinton was involved in Steele’s reports or worked with Russian entities to feed information to Steele,” Kessler wrote.

Nonetheless, conservative talk-show hosts amplified Nunes’s message. On Fox News, Tucker Carlson denounced Steele as “an intense partisan with passionately left-wing views about American politics,” and said, inaccurately, that his “sloppy and reckless” research “appears to form the basis” of the entire Mueller investigation. Sean Hannity charged that Steele’s dossier was “claptrap” filled with “Russian lies” that were intended to poison “our own intelligence and law-enforcement network” against Trump. The editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* accused Steele of turning the F.B.I. into “a tool of anti-Trump political actors.” Rush Limbaugh warned his radio listeners, “The battle is between people like us and the Deep State who are trying to keep hidden what they did.”

President Trump had mocked “the dirty dossier,” suggesting that a “failed spy” had relied on “made-up facts by sleazebag political operatives.” But on February 8th the President denounced Steele by name for the first time. “Steele of fraudulent Dossier fame,” he tweeted, was “all tied into Crooked Hillary.”

Two days later, Burrows, of Orbis, was at his home, in Winchester, southwest of London, struggling to express to me how odd and disturbing it was to have his business partner targeted by



e. flake

*“Actually, I’m pretty sure aging naturally and aging gracefully are mutually exclusive.”*



the President of the United States. A tight-lipped fifty-nine-year-old who is conservative in politics and in manner, Burrows, like Steele, had spent decades as a British intelligence officer. “This whole thing has been quite surreal,” he said. “We are being made into a political football, in U.S. terms, which we really regret. Chris is being accused of being the heart of some Deep State conspiracy, and he’s not even in your state.”

Steele’s lawyers have advised him not to speak publicly about the controversy, and, because he is a former intelligence officer, much of his life must remain secret. His accusers know this, and, as Senator Whitehouse explained, “they are using selective declassification as a tactic—they use declassified information to tell their side, and then the rebuttal is classified.” Both the criminal referral and Nunes’s report used secret evidence to malign Steele while providing no means for his defenders to respond without breaching national-security secrets. But interviews with Steele’s friends, colleagues, and business associates tell a very different story about how a British citizen became enmeshed in one of America’s most consequential political battles.

Steele was born in 1964 in Aden, then the capital of Yemen. His father worked for the U.K.’s national weather service, and had postings overseas and in Great Britain. Steele’s family was middle class, but its roots were blue-collar: one of Steele’s grandfathers was a Welsh coal miner. An outstanding student, Steele was accepted at Cambridge University in 1982. He soon set his sights on becoming the president of the Cambridge Union, the prestigious debating society. It is such a common path for ambitious future leaders that, according to one former member, its motto should be “The Egos Have Landed.” Getting elected president requires shrewd political skills, and Steele secured the position, in part, by muscling the university newspaper, for which he had been writing, into endorsing his candidacy. His jockeying created enemies. One anonymous rival recently told the *Daily Mail* that Steele used to be a “little creep.”

Steele was a middle-of-the-road La-

bour Party supporter, and at the Cambridge Union his allies, known as the Anti-Establishment Faction, were state-schooled, middle-class students. Steele’s camp competed against a blue-blooded Establishment Faction and a right-wing Libertarian Faction. His longtime friend, who was part of a like-minded society at Oxford, said, “Almost all of us had come from less posh



families, and suffered a bit from the impostor syndrome that made us doubt we belonged there, so we worked many times harder to prove ourselves.” He recalled Steele as an “astoundingly diligent” student with “huge integrity,” adding, “He just puts the bit in his teeth and charges the hill. He’s almost like a cyborg.”

Graham Davies, now a well-known public-speaking coach in the U.K., became friends with Steele in the Cambridge Union. He described him as “ultra low-key but ultra high-intensity,” adding, “He’s a very quiet guy who listens more than he talks, which made him stand out.” Davies went on, “Most of us like a bit of the spotlight, but Chris has always been the opposite. That’s been part of his integrity. He’s quietly in control.” Davies, who is a conservative, told me that Steele has many conservative friends. (Steele supported the Labour government of Tony Blair until the Iraq War, but he voted for a local Conservative official in his home county.) “He’s not an ideologue,” Davies said. “He’s got his political views, but he’s a pragmatic thinker. Fairness, integrity, and truth, for him, trump any ideology.”

Steele is said to be the first president of the Cambridge Union to invite a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization to speak. And he presided over numerous high-profile political debates, including one in which the proposition that President Ronald

Reagan’s foreign policies had hurt the U.K. carried the house.

Tellingly, none of Steele’s old friends seem to remember the first time they met him. Of average height and build, with pleasant features, a clean-cut style of dress, and a cool, neutral gaze, he didn’t draw attention to himself. He was a natural candidate to become professionally unnoticeable. Davies, who dines several times a year with Steele and other schoolmates, said, “He’s more low-key than Smiley”—the John le Carré character. But, he noted, whenever Steele took on a task “he was like a terrier with a bone—when something needs investigating, he applies the most intense intellect I’ve ever seen.”

Steele graduated in 1986, with a degree in social and political science, and initially thought that he might go into journalism or the law. One day, though, he answered a newspaper ad seeking people interested in working abroad. The advertiser turned out to be M.I.6, which, after a battery of tests, recruited Steele into its Russian-language program. By the time he was in his mid-twenties he was living in Moscow.

Steele worked out of the British Embassy for M.I.6, under diplomatic cover. His years in Moscow, 1990 to 1993, were among the most dramatic in Russian history, a period that included the collapse of the Communist Party; nationalist uprisings in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Baltic states; and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Boris Yeltsin gained ultimate power in Russia, and a moment of democratic promise faded as the K.G.B.—now called the F.S.B.—reasserted its influence, oligarchs snapped up state assets, and nationalist political forces began to emerge. Vladimir Putin, a K.G.B. operative returning from East Germany, reinvented himself in the shadowy world of St. Petersburg politics. By the time Steele left the country, optimism was souring, and a politics of resentment—against the oligarchs, against an increasing gap between rich and poor, and against the West—was taking hold.

After leaving Moscow, Steele was assigned an undercover posting with the British Embassy in Paris, but he and a hundred and sixteen other British spies had their cover blown by an anonymously published list. Steele came in from the

cold and returned to London, and in 2006 he began running its Russia desk, growing increasingly pessimistic about the direction of the Russian Federation.

Steele's already dim view of the Kremlin darkened in November, 2006, when Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian K.G.B. officer and a Putin critic who had been recruited by M.I.6, suffered an agonizing death in a London hospital, after drinking a cup of tea poisoned with radioactive polonium-210. Moscow had evidently sanctioned a brazen murder in his own country. Steele was put in charge of M.I.6's investigation. Authorities initially planned to indict one suspect in the murder, but Steele's investigative work persuaded them to indict a second suspect as well. Nine years later, the U.K.'s official inquiry report was finally released, and it confirmed Steele's view: the murder was an operation by the F.S.B., and it was "probably approved" by Vladimir Putin.

Steele has never commented on the case, or on any other aspect of his intelligence work, but Richard Dearlove, who led M.I.6 from 1999 to 2004, has described his reputation as "superb." A former senior officer recalls him as "a Russia-area expert whose knowledge I and others respected—he was very careful, and very savvy." Another former M.I.6 officer described him as having a "Marmite" personality—a reference to the salty British spread, which people either love or hate. He suggested that Steele didn't appear to be "going places in the service," noting that, after the Cold War, Russia had become a backwater at M.I.6. But he acknowledged that Steele "knew Russia well," and that running the Russia desk was "a proper job that you don't give to an idiot."

The British Secret Intelligence Service is highly regarded by the United States, particularly for its ability to harvest information from face-to-face sources, rather than from signals intelligence, such as electronic surveillance, as the U.S. often does. British and American intelligence services work closely together, and, while Steele was at M.I.6, British intelligence was often included in the U.S. President's daily-briefing reports. In 2008, Michael Hayden, the C.I.A. director, visited the U.K., and Steele briefed him on Russian devel-

opments. The following year, President Obama visited the U.K., and was briefed on a report that Steele had written about Russia. Steve Hall, a former chief of the C.I.A.'s Central Eurasia Division, which includes Russia, the former Soviet states, and the Balkans, told me, "M.I.6 is second only perhaps to the U.S. in its ability to collect intelligence from Russia." He added, "We've always coordinated



closely with them because they did such a great job. We're playing in the Yankee Stadium of espionage here. This isn't Guatemala."

In 2008, Steele informed M.I.6 that he planned to leave the service and open a commercial intelligence firm with Burrows. He left in good standing, but his exit was hastened, because M.I.6 regarded his plans as a potential conflict of interest. Launching the business was a risky move: London was filled with companies run by former intelligence officers selling their contacts and inside knowledge. To differentiate itself, Orbis, which opened its office in Mayfair, attempted to exploit Steele's Russian expertise. The strategy appears to have paid off. According to people with knowledge of the company, Orbis grossed approximately twenty million dollars in its first nine years. Steele now drives a Land Rover Discovery Sport, and belongs to a golf club. He also runs a bit, but the feats that kept him in shape while he was a spy—he ran six marathons and twenty-five half-marathons, and competed in a dozen Olympic-length triathlon events—have been replaced by the carrying of a briefcase. His free time is devoted largely to his family, which includes three cats, one of whom not long ago replicated the most infamous allegation in the Steele dossier by peeing on a family member's bed.

Orbis's clients are mostly businesses or law firms representing corporations. Burrows said that although the com-

pany has fewer than ten full-time employees, "we're a bit like the bridge on the Starship Enterprise—we're a small group but we manage an enormous ship." To serve its clients, Orbis employs dozens of confidential "collectors" around the world, whom it pays as contract associates. Some of the collectors are private investigators at smaller firms; others are investigative reporters or highly placed experts in strategically useful jobs. Depending on the task and the length of engagement, the fee for collectors can be as much as two thousand dollars a day. The collectors harvest intelligence from a much larger network of unpaid sources, some of whom don't even realize they are being treated as informants. These sources occasionally receive favors—such as help in getting their children into Western schools—but money doesn't change hands, because it could risk violating laws against, say, bribing government officials or insider trading. Paying sources might also encourage them to embellish.

Steele has not been to Russia, or visited any former Soviet states, since 2009. Unlike some of his former M.I.6 colleagues, he has not been declared persona non grata by Putin's regime, but, in 2012, an Orbis informant quoted an F.S.B. agent describing him as "an enemy of Mother Russia." Steele concluded that it would be difficult for him to work in the country unnoticed. The firm guards the identities of its sources, but it's clear that many Russian contacts can be interviewed elsewhere, and London is the center of the post-Soviet Russian diaspora.

Orbis often performs anti-corruption investigations for clients attempting internal reviews, and helps hedge funds and other financial companies perform due diligence or obtain strategic information. One Orbis client who agreed to talk to me, a Western businessman with interests in Russia and Ukraine, described Steele to me as "very efficient, very professional, and very credible." He said that his company had successfully cross-checked Steele's research with other people, adding, "I don't know anyone who's been critical of his work. His reports are very good. It's an absolute no-brainer that he's just a political target. They're trying to shoot the messenger."



Orbis promises confidentiality, and releases no information on its clientele. Some of its purported clients, such as a major Western oil company, are conventional corporations. Others are controversial, including a London law firm representing the interests of Oleg Deripaska, the billionaire victor of Russia's aluminum wars, a notoriously violent battle. He has been described as Putin's favorite oligarch. Steele's possible financial ties to Deripaska recently prompted Senator Grassley to demand more information from the London law firm. If a financial trail between Deripaska and Orbis can be established, it is likely to raise even more questions about Steele, because Deripaska has already figured in the Russia investigation, in an unsavory light. Paul Manafort, Trump's former campaign manager, has been accused of defrauding Deripaska's company while working for it in Ukraine. (Manafort has been indicted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller on charges of money laundering and other financial crimes. He has pleaded not guilty.) Even if Steele's rumored work for Deripaska is aboveboard, it illustrates the transition that he has made from the world of government service to the ethically gray world of commerce. Oligarchs battling other oligarchs provide some of the most lucrative work for investigators with expertise in Russia. Orbis maintains that, as long as its activities are limited to providing litigation support for Western law firms acting in Western courts, it is helping to settle disputes in a more civilized way than they would be in Russia. But Steele stepped into a murkier realm when he left M.I.6.

Republican claims to the contrary, Steele's interest in Trump did not spring from his work for the Clinton campaign. He ran across Trump's name almost as soon as he went into private business, many years before the 2016 election. Two of his earliest cases at Orbis involved investigating international crime rings whose leaders, coincidentally, were based in New York's Trump Tower.

Steele's first client after leaving M.I.6 was England's Football Association, which hoped to host the World Cup in 2018, but suspected dirty dealings by the governing body, FIFA. England lost out

in its bid to Russia, and Steele determined that the Kremlin had rigged the process with bribes. According to Ken Bensinger's "Red Card," an upcoming book about the scandal, "one of Steele's best sources" informed him that the Deputy Prime Minister, Igor Sechin—now the C.E.O. of the Russian state-controlled oil giant Rosneft—is suspected of having travelled to Qatar "to swap World Cup votes."

Steele appears to have spoken anonymously to the *Sunday Times* of London about the case. An "ex-M.I.6 source" who investigated the bidding process told the paper, "The key thing with Russia was six months before the bid, it got to the point where the country feared the humiliation of being beaten and had to do something. . . . Putin dragged in all sorts of capabilities." He added, "Don't expect me or anyone else to produce a document with Putin's signature saying 'Please, X, bribe Y with this amount in this way.' He's not going to do that."

Steele might have been expected to move on once his investigation of the bidding was concluded. But he had discovered that the corruption at FIFA was global, and he felt that it should be addressed. The only organization that could handle an investigation of such scope, he felt, was the F.B.I. In

2011, Steele contacted an American agent he'd met who headed the Bureau's division for serious crimes in Eurasia. Steele introduced him to his sources, who proved essential to the ensuing investigation. In 2015, the Justice Department indicted fourteen people in connection with a hundred and fifty million dollars in bribes and kickbacks. One of them was Chuck Blazer, a top FIFA official who had embezzled a fortune from the organization and became an informant for the F.B.I. Blazer had an eighteen-thousand-dollar-per-month apartment in Trump Tower, a few floors down from Trump's residence.

Nobody had alleged that Trump knew of any FIFA crimes, but Steele soon came across Trump Tower again. Several years ago, the F.B.I. hired Steele to help crack an international gambling and money-laundering ring purportedly run by a suspected Russian organized-crime figure named Alimzhan Tokhtakhounov. The syndicate was based in an apartment in Trump Tower. Eventually, federal officials indicted more than thirty co-conspirators for financial crimes. Tokhtakhounov, though, eluded arrest, becoming a fugitive. Interpol issued a "red notice" calling for his arrest. But, in the fall of 2013, he showed up at the Miss Universe



contest in Moscow—and sat near the pageant’s owner, Donald Trump.

“It was as if all criminal roads led to Trump Tower,” Steele told friends.

Burrows told me that he and Steele made a pact when they left M.I.6: “We both agreed it was a duty to alert U.K. and allied authorities if we came across anything with national-security dimensions. It comes from a very long government service. We still have that ethos of wanting to do the right thing by our authorities.”

By working with law-enforcement authorities on investigations, Steele has kept a foot in his former life. Some critics have questioned the propriety of this. Lindsey Graham recently argued, in the *Washington Post*, “You can be an F.B.I. informant. You can be a political operative. But you can’t be both, particularly at the same time.”

Burrows said that on several occasions Orbis had warned authorities about major security threats. Three years ago, a trusted Middle Eastern source told Orbis that a group of ISIS militants were using the flow of refugees from Syria to infiltrate Europe. Orbis shared the information with associates who relayed the intelligence to German security officials. Several months later, when a concert hall in Paris, the Bataclan, was attacked by terrorists, Burrows and Steele felt remorse at not having notified French authorities as well. When Steele took his suspicions about Trump to the F.B.I. in the summer of 2016, it was in keeping with Orbis protocol, rather than a politically driven aberration.

Even before Steele became involved in the U.S. Presidential campaign, he was convinced that the Kremlin was interfering in Western elections. In April of 2016, not long before he took on the Fusion assignment, he finished a secret investigation, which he called Project Charlemagne, for a private client. It involved a survey of Russian interference in the politics of four members of the European Union—France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany—along with Turkey, a candidate for membership. The report chronicles persistent, aggressive political interference by the Kremlin: social-media warfare aimed at inflaming fear and prejudice, and “opaque financial support” given to favored politicians in the form of bank loans, gifts,

and other kinds of support. The report discusses the Kremlin’s entanglement with the former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and the French right-wing leader Marine Le Pen. (Le Pen and Berlusconi deny having had such ties.) It also suggests that Russian aid was likely given to lesser-known right-wing nationalists in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. The Kremlin’s long-term aim, the report concludes, was to boost extremist groups and politicians at the expense of Europe’s liberal democracies. The more immediate goal was to “destroy” the E.U., in order to end the punishing economic sanctions that the E.U. and the U.S. had imposed on Russia after its 2014 political and military interference in Ukraine.

Although the report’s language was dry, and many of the details familiar to anyone who had been watching Russia closely, Project Charlemagne was the equivalent of a flashing red light. It warned that Russian intelligence services were becoming more strategic and increasingly disruptive. Russian interference in foreign elections, it cautioned, was only “likely to grow in size and reach over time.”

**I**n the spring of 2016, Steele got a call from Glenn Simpson, a former investigative reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* who, in 2011, had left journalism to co-found Fusion GPS. Simpson was hoping that Steele could help Fusion follow some difficult leads on Trump’s ties to Russia. Simpson said that he was working for a law firm, but didn’t name the ultimate client.

The funding for the project originally came from an organization financed by the New York investor Paul Singer, a Republican who disliked Trump. But, after it became clear that Trump would win the Republican nomination, Singer dropped out. At that point, Fusion persuaded Marc Elias, the general counsel for the Clinton campaign, to subsidize the unfinished research. This bipartisan funding history belies the argument that the research was corrupted by its sponsorship.

Steele and Simpson had previously worked together, and they shared a mutual fascination with Russian oligarchs and international organized crime. They had symbiotic approaches. Fusion fo-

cussed on open-source research—mind-numbing dives into the fine print of public records. Steele’s specialty was gathering intelligence from informed sources, many of them Russian.

One question particularly gnawed at Simpson. Why had Trump repeatedly gone to Russia in search of business, yet returned empty-handed? Steele was tantalized, and took the job, thinking that he’d find evidence of a few dodgy deals, and not much else. He evidently didn’t consider the danger of poking into a Presidential candidate’s darkest secrets. “He’s just got blinkers,” Steele’s longtime friend told me. “He doesn’t put his head in the oven so much as not see the oven.”

Within a few weeks, two or three of Steele’s long-standing collectors came back with reports drawn from Orbis’s larger network of sources. Steele looked at the material and, according to people familiar with the matter, asked himself, “Oh, my God—what *is* this?” He called in Burrows, who was normally unflappable. Burrows realized that they had a problem. As Simpson later put it, “We threw out a line in the water, and Moby-Dick came back.”

Steele’s sources claimed that the F.S.B. could easily blackmail Trump, in part because it had videos of him engaging in “perverted sexual acts” in Russia. The sources said that when Trump had stayed in the Presidential suite of Moscow’s Ritz-Carlton hotel, in 2013, he had paid “a number of prostitutes to perform a ‘golden showers’ (urination) show in front of him,” thereby defiling a bed that Barack and Michelle Obama had slept in during a state visit. The allegation was attributed to four sources, but their reports were secondhand—nobody had witnessed the event or tracked down a prostitute, and one spoke generally about “embarrassing material.” Two sources were unconnected to the others, but the remaining two could have spoken to each other. In the reports Steele had collected, the names of the sources were omitted, but they were described as “a former top-level Russian intelligence officer still active inside the Kremlin,” a “member of the staff at the hotel,” a “female staffer at the hotel when TRUMP had stayed there,” and “a close associate of TRUMP who had organized and managed his recent trips to Moscow.”



More significant, in hindsight, than the sexual details were claims that the Kremlin and Trump were politically colluding in the 2016 campaign. The Russians were described as having cultivated Trump and traded favors with him “for at least 5 years.” Putin was described as backing Trump in order to “sow discord and disunity both within the U.S.” and within the transatlantic alliance. The report claimed that, although Trump had not signed any real-estate-development deals, he and his top associates had repeatedly accepted intelligence from the Kremlin on Hillary Clinton and other political rivals. The allegations were astounding—and improbable. They could constitute trea-

tion or carry on. If he kept investigating, and then alerted officials who he thought should know about his findings, he feared that his life—and, indeed, the life of anyone who touched the dossier—would never be the same.

At the time, Steele figured that almost nobody would ever see the raw intelligence. The credibility of Steele’s dossier has been much debated, but few realize that it was a compilation of contemporaneous interviews rather than a finished product. Orbis was just a subcontractor, and Steele and Burrows reasoned that Fusion could, if it wished, process the findings into an edited report for the ultimate client. So Orbis left it up to Fusion to make the judgment

journalism, where you try to get more than one source to confirm something. In the intelligence business, you don’t pretend you’re a hundred per cent accurate. If you’re seventy or eighty per cent accurate, that makes you one of the best.”

On June 24, 2016, Steele’s fifty-second birthday, Simpson called, asking him to submit the dossier. The previous day, the U.K. had voted to withdraw from the E.U., and Steele was feeling wretched about it. Few had thought that Brexit was possible. An upset victory by Trump no longer seemed out of the question. Steele was so nervous about maintaining secrecy and protecting his sources that he sent a courier by plane to Wash-



*The dossier alleges that Putin backed Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in order to “sow discord and disunity” in America.*

son even if they were only partly true.

According to people familiar with the matter, as Steele began to assemble the first of seventeen memos, which became the dossier, Burrows expressed reservations about including the golden-showers allegation. He had a cautious temperament, and worried about the impact that the sensational item might have. But Steele argued that it would be dishonest and distorting to cherry-pick details, and that the possibility of a potential American President being subject to blackmail was too important to hide. “That’s classic Steele,” his longtime friend told me. “He’s so straight.”

In a fateful decision, Steele chose to include everything. People familiar with the matter say that Steele knew he could either shred the incendiary informa-

calls about what to leave in, and to decide whether to add caveats and source notes of the kind that accompany most government intelligence reports.

John Sipher spent twenty-eight years as a clandestine officer in the C.I.A., and ran the agency’s Russia program before retiring, in 2014. He said of Steele’s memos, “This is source material, *not* expert opinion.” Sipher has described the dossier as “generally credible,” although not correct in every detail. He said, “People have misunderstood that it’s a collection of dots, not a connecting of the dots. But it provided the first narrative saying what Russia might be up to.” Alexander Vershbow, a U.S. Ambassador to Russia under George W. Bush, told me, “In intelligence, you evaluate your sources as best you can, but it’s not like

ington to hand-deliver a copy of the dossier. The courier’s copy left the sources redacted, providing instead descriptions of them that enabled Fusion to assess their basic credibility. Steele feared that, for some of his Russian sources, exposure would be a death sentence.

Steele also felt a duty to get the information to the F.B.I. Although Trump has tweeted that the dossier was “all cooked up by Hillary Clinton,” Steele approached the Bureau on his own. According to Simpson’s sworn testimony to the House Intelligence Committee, Steele told him in June, 2016, that he wanted to alert the U.S. government, and explained, “I’m a former intelligence officer, and we’re your closest ally.” Simpson testified that he asked to think about it for a few days; when Steele brought it up again,

Simpson relented. As Simpson told the Senate Judiciary Committee, “Let’s be clear. This was not considered by me to be part of the work we were doing. This was like you’re driving to work and you see something happen and you call 911.” Steele, he said, felt “professionally obligated to do it.” Simpson went along, he testified, because Steele was the “national-security expert,” whereas he was merely “an ex-journalist.”

The Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Garrow has questioned Steele’s motives in the *Wall Street Journal*, calling him a “paid operative” spreading “partisan gossip.” He told me that Steele’s whistle-blowing seemed “self-dramatizing,” adding, “We see Steele viewing himself as a historically important person. He believes he has unique knowledge that he must warn the world about.” As a historian who has written critically about the F.B.I.’s persecution of Martin Luther King, Jr., Garrow is troubled by Steele’s zealotry. “In this secret-agent world, there’s a desire to maximize their importance,” Garrow said. “It’s as if all these guys wanted to play themselves in the movies.”

But Mark Medish, a former director of Russian affairs at the National Security Council, told me that “if Steele had not shared his findings, he might have been accused of dereliction or a coverup.” He added, “It takes courage to deliver bad news, particularly when the stakes are so high.” And Senator Whitehouse described Steele’s actions as akin to warning the F.B.I. about a “physical detonation of some sort,” noting, “If it had gone off, and he or the F.B.I. had ignored it, heads would roll.”

Regardless of what others might think, it’s clear that Steele believed that his dossier was filled with important intelligence. Otherwise, he would never have subjected it, his firm, and his reputation to the harsh scrutiny of the F.B.I. “I’m impressed that he was willing to share it with the F.B.I.,” Sipher said. “That gives him real credibility to me, the notion that he’d give it to the best intelligence professionals in the world.”

On July 5, 2016, Steele went to his London office and met with the F.B.I. agent with whom he’d worked on the FIFA case. The agent responded to the first memo in the dossier, Steele has said, with “shock and horror.” Simpson knew

that Steele had informed the F.B.I., but he has said that, amid the tumult of the 2016 campaign, it more or less slipped his mind. (In testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, he recalled asking himself, “I wonder what the F.B.I. did? Whoops—haven’t heard from them.”) As the summer went on, there was little indication that the F.B.I. was paying much attention, either.

For all the Republicans’ talk of a top-down Democratic plot, Steele and Simpson appear never to have told their ultimate client—the Clinton campaign’s law firm—that Steele had gone to the F.B.I. Clinton’s campaign spent much of the summer of 2016 fending off stories about the Bureau’s investigation into her e-mails, without knowing that the F.B.I. had launched a counter-intelligence investigation into the Trump team’s ties to Russia—one fuelled, in part, by the Clinton campaign’s own opposition research. As a top Clinton-campaign official told me, “If I’d *known* the F.B.I. was investigating Trump, I would have been shouting it from the rooftops!”

At virtually the same time that Steele told the F.B.I. about Russia’s interference in the 2016 Presidential campaign, the Kremlin was engaged—without his knowledge—in at least two other schemes to pass compromising information about Hillary Clinton to Trump’s inner circle.

The first scheme involved the Trump foreign-policy adviser George Papadopoulos. In April, 2016, over drinks



with an Australian diplomat at a London bar, he divulged that Russia had access to thousands of Clinton e-mails. The diplomat informed his supervisors of this bizarre-sounding claim, but Papadopoulos was young and inexperienced, and the Australians didn’t give it much weight.

The second scheme unfolded at Trump Tower in New York. On June 9,

2016, top members of Trump’s campaign—including Donald Trump, Jr., Paul Manafort, and Jared Kushner—had a private meeting on the twenty-fifth floor with Natalia Veselnitskaya, a Russian lawyer. The attendees had been promised that she would present them with dirt Moscow had collected on Hillary Clinton. The meeting was set up after Donald, Jr., was approached by an emissary close to the Agalarov family—Azerbaijani oligarchs with whom Trump had partnered on the 2013 Miss Universe pageant, in Moscow. In an e-mail, the emissary promised Donald, Jr., that the documents “would incriminate Hillary and her dealings with Russia and would be very useful to your father,” and described this gift as “part of Russia and its government’s support for Mr. Trump.” Instead of going to the F.B.I., as Steele had, Trump’s older son responded giddily to the e-mail: “If it’s what you say I love it especially later in the summer.”

Donald, Jr., and the other participants insist that nothing of consequence happened at the Trump Tower meeting: Veselnitskaya expressed frustration with U.S. sanctions on Russia, but offered no information on Clinton. A number of former intelligence officers, however, believe that the meeting, which happened soon after Papadopoulos’s encounter with the Australian diplomat, enhances the dossier’s credibility. John McLaughlin, the deputy director of the C.I.A. from 2000 until 2004, told me, “I haven’t formed a final thought, but clearly parts of it are starting to resonate with what we know to be true about the Russians’ willingness to deliver information harmful to Hillary Clinton.”

Furthermore, Steele’s dossier had highlighted the Agalarov family’s connection with Trump. Ten months before the *Times* reported on the Trump Tower meeting, exposing the role of the Agalarov family’s emissary in setting it up, one of Steele’s memos had suggested that an “Azeri business associate of Trump, ARAZ AGALAROV, will know the details” of “bribes” and “sexual activities” that Trump had allegedly engaged in while visiting St. Petersburg. (A lawyer for the Agalarovs denies these claims.)

On June 14, 2016, five days after the Trump Tower meeting, the *Washington Post* broke the news that the Russians were believed to have hacked into the

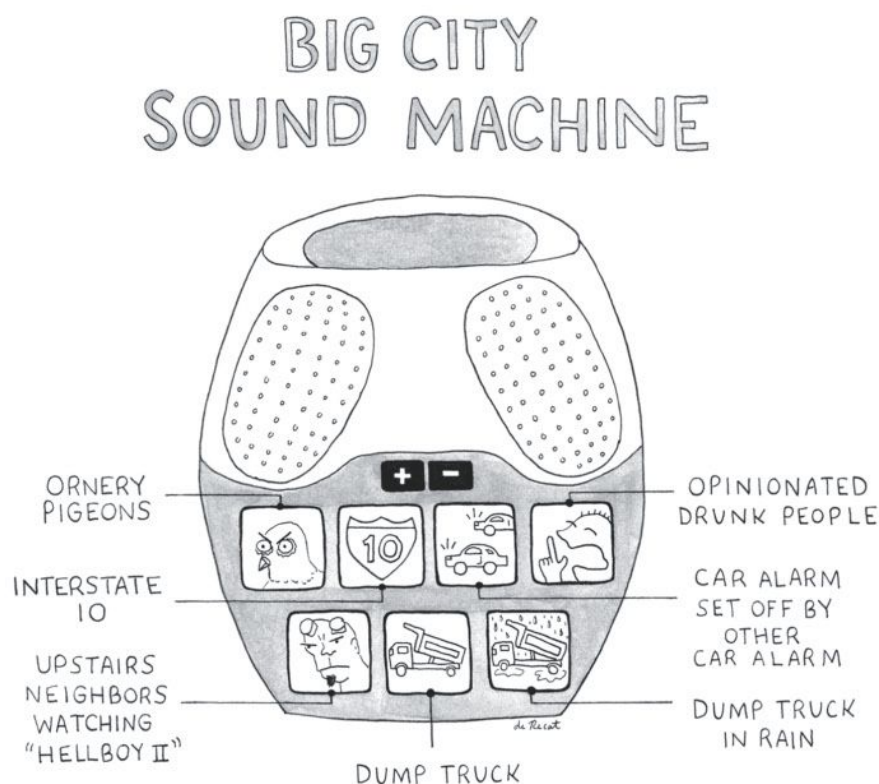


Democratic National Committee's e-mail system. The first reports were remarkably blasé. D.N.C. officials admitted that they had learned about the hack months earlier. (It later surfaced that in November of 2014 Dutch intelligence officials had provided U.S. authorities with evidence that the Russians had broken into the Democratic Party's computer system. U.S. officials reportedly thanked the Dutch for the tip, sending cake and flowers, but took little action.) When the infiltration of the D.N.C. finally became public, various officials were quoted as saying that the Russians were always trying to penetrate U.S. government systems, and were likely just trying to understand American politics better.

The attitudes of Democratic officials changed drastically when, three days before the start of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, WikiLeaks dumped twenty thousand stolen D.N.C. e-mails onto the Internet. The e-mails had been weaponized: what had seemed a passive form of spying was now "an active measure," in the parlance of espionage. The leaked e-mails, some of which suggested that the D.N.C. had secretly favored Clinton's candidacy over that of Bernie Sanders, appeared just when the Party was trying to unify its supporters. The Party's chair, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, was forced to resign, and recriminations and demonstrations disrupted the Convention.

Trump's response was exultant. He said, "If it is Russia—which it's probably not, nobody knows who it is—but if it is . . . Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the thirty thousand e-mails that are missing. I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press." His campaign later described these comments as a joke.

At this point, a Clinton foreign-policy adviser, Laura Rosenberger, who had held various positions at the National Security Council and at the State Department during the Bush and Obama Administrations, grew seriously alarmed. She'd already noticed that Trump had pro-Russian positions on many issues, which seemed to her to be inexplicably outside the Republican mainstream. She'd also been struck by Trump's hiring of Paul Manafort, who had worked as a political consultant for



pro-Kremlin forces in Ukraine. Trump's team then appeared to play a role in modifying the G.O.P. platform so that it better reflected Russia's position on Ukraine policy. "It was all beginning to snowball," she told me. "And then, with the e-mail leaks, it was, like, 'Oh, fuck'—excuse my French—'we are under attack!' That was the moment when, as a national-security adviser, you break into sweats."

Rosenberger, meanwhile, had no idea that the Clinton campaign had indirectly employed a Russia expert: Steele. Orbis's work was sealed off, behind a legal barrier. Marc Elias, the attorney at Perkins Coie who was serving as the Clinton campaign's general counsel, acted as a firewall between the campaign and the private investigators digging up information on Trump. It's a common practice for law firms to hire investigators on behalf of clients, so that any details can be protected by attorney-client privilege. Fusion briefed only Elias on the reports. Simpson sent Elias nothing on paper—he was briefed orally. Elias, according to people familiar with the matter, was flabbergasted by the dossier but wasn't sure what to do with the

allegations. "Sex stuff is kind of worthless in a campaign," Simpson told me. In the absence of live accusers or documentary evidence, such material is easy to dismiss, and can make the purveyor look sleazy.

At the same time, the financial machinations described in Steele's reports were complex, and difficult to confirm: "YANUKOVYCH had confided in PUTIN that he did authorize and order substantial kick-back payments to MANAFORT as alleged but sought to reassure him that there was no documentary trail left behind." (Manafort has denied this.) Elias broadly summarized some of the information to top campaign officials, including the campaign manager, Robby Mook, but Elias found much of the Kremlinology abstruse. He was more interested in finding actionable intelligence on the people who had exfiltrated the Democrats' internal e-mails, and how to stop them.

Mook told me, "The problem with the Russia story is that people just weren't buying it. Today, it's, like, 'Of course!' But back then people thought that we were just desperately peddling conspiracy theories." After the D.N.C.'s e-mails were

hacked, Mook went on TV talk shows and pointed the finger at Russia, but, he says, his comments were often dismissed as “spin.” On Jake Tapper’s “State of the Union,” he declared, “What’s disturbing to us is that experts are telling us that Russian state actors broke into the D.N.C., stole these e-mails, and other experts are now saying that the Russians are releasing these e-mails for the purpose of actually helping Donald Trump.” Tapper then interviewed Donald Trump, Jr., who ridiculed Mook’s accusation as “disgusting” and “phony”—even though it’s now known that, just a few weeks earlier, he had met at Trump Tower with a Russian offering dirt on Clinton.

That summer, Steele noticed a few small news items further connecting Trump’s circle to Russia. On July 7, 2016, two days after Steele met in London with the F.B.I., Carter Page, a Trump foreign-policy adviser, travelled to Moscow, on a campaign-approved visit, and delivered a lecture at the prestigious New Economic School. Page’s remarks were head-turning. He criticized “Washington and other Western capitals” for “their often hypocritical focus on ideas such as democratization, inequality, corruption, and regime change.”

Page was an odd choice for Trump. In New York in 2013, two Russian intelligence operatives had attempted to recruit Page, an oil-industry consultant, although wiretaps revealed that one of the operatives had described him as an “idiot.” The F.B.I. later indicted the two Russian spies, and warned Page that the Kremlin was trying to recruit him, but he continued to pursue oil-and-gas deals in Russia. Ian Bremmer, the president of the Eurasia Group, a risk-consulting firm where Page had previously worked, said that Page had become a pro-Kremlin “wackadoodle.”

Steele didn’t know it, but U.S. authorities were independently monitoring Page. According to the recently released report by the Democratic minority on the House Intelligence Committee, the F.B.I. had interviewed Page about his contacts with Russian officials in March, 2016—the same month that Trump named him an adviser.

When Page gave his Moscow lecture, he declined to answer questions from the audience about whether he would

be meeting Russian officials. Soon afterward, Steele filed another memo to Fusion, alleging that Page had indeed met with Russians close to Putin, as part of an ongoing effort by the Russians to cultivate sympathetic Trump aides. Steele’s sources claimed that one person Page had met with was Igor Sechin, the C.E.O. of the oil giant Rosneft. Sechin had purportedly proposed to Page increasing U.S.-Russian energy cooperation in exchange for lifting the Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia. Page, the dossier said, had “reacted positively” but had been “non-committal.” (Rosneft declined to comment. Page told me, “Steele got everything wrong as it relates to me.”)

A subsequent Steele memo claimed that Sechin was so eager to get U.S. sanctions lifted that, as an incentive, he offered Page the opportunity to help sell a stake of Rosneft to investors. Steele’s memo also alleged that while Page was in Russia he met with a top Kremlin official, Igor Diveykin, who floated the idea of leaking Russian *kompromat* on Clinton, in order to boost Trump’s candidacy. According to Steele’s memos, the damaging material on Clinton was political, not personal, and had been gathered partly from Russian intercepts.

Page has denied any wrongdoing. In

## CLAMOR

Elsewhere air strikes carve  
white gold through the night.  
How they bloom and brandish  
in the shadow of a warship  
on the nightly news is meant  
perhaps  
to stir in my chest some vain-  
glorious clamor, some cry.  
Instead I remember you  
washing the dishes while  
a single tiny soap bubble  
floated behind you, how you  
didn’t know it was there, and  
perhaps  
I craved the delicate secret  
of the thing suspended  
and temporary in the warm  
kitchen glow, and wanted it to  
stay mine, no matter the cost.

—Elly Bookman

a congressional interview in November, 2017, he initially said that he had not met with any Russian officials during his July trip. But, according to the Democrats’ recent Intelligence Committee report, when Page was confronted with evidence he was “forced to admit” that he had met with a top Kremlin official, after all, as well as with a Rosneft executive—Sechin’s close associate Andrey Baranov. The dossier may or may not have erred in its naming of specific officials, but it was clearly prescient in its revelation that during the Presidential campaign a covert relationship had been established between Page and powerful Russians who wanted U.S. sanctions lifted. Trump and his advisers have repeatedly denied having colluded with Russians. But, in Steele’s telling, the Russians were clearly offering Trump secret political help.

Steele’s memos describe two other Trump advisers as sympathetic to Russia: Paul Manafort, then the campaign manager, and Michael Flynn, an adviser whom Trump later appointed his national-security adviser. Flynn resigned from that post almost immediately, after it was revealed that he had engaged in conversations with the Russian Ambassador, Sergey Kislyak, about U.S. sanctions that Obama had imposed before



leaving office. Flynn has become a central figure in Mueller's investigation, having pleaded guilty to lying to the F.B.I. about his conversations with Kislyak.

On July 26, 2016, after WikiLeaks disseminated the D.N.C. e-mails, Steele filed yet another memo, this time claiming that the Kremlin was "behind" the hacking, which was part of a Russian cyber war against Hillary Clinton's campaign. Many of the details seemed far-fetched: Steele's sources claimed that the digital attack involved agents "within the Democratic Party structure itself," as well as Russian émigrés in the U.S. and "associated offensive cyber operators."

Neither of these claims has been substantiated, and it's hard to imagine that they will be. But one of the dossier's other seemingly outlandish assertions—that the hack involved "state-sponsored cyber operatives working in Russia"—has been buttressed. According to Special Counsel Mueller's recent indictment of thirteen Russian nationals, Kremlin-backed operatives, hiding behind fake and stolen identities, posed as Americans on Facebook and Twitter, spreading lies and fanning ethnic and religious hatred with the aim of damaging Clinton and helping Trump. The Kremlin apparently spent about a million dollars a month to fund Internet trolls working round-the-clock shifts in a run-down office building in St. Petersburg. Their tactics were similar to those outlined in Steele's *Charlemagne* investigation, including spreading falsehoods designed to turn voters toward extremism. The Russian operation also involved political activism inside the U.S., including the organizing of bogus pro-Trump rallies.

In England, Steele kept cranking out memos, but he was growing anxious about the lack of response from the F.B.I. As the summer wore on, he confided in an American friend, Jonathan Winer, a Democratic lawyer and foreign-policy specialist who was working at the State Department. Steele told him that Orbis sources had come across unsettling information about Trump's ties to Russia. Winer recalls Steele saying that he "was more certain of it than about any information he'd gotten before in his life." Winer told me, "Chris was deeply disturbed

that the Kremlin was infecting our country. By hacking our computers and using WikiLeaks to disseminate the information—it was an infection. He thought it would have really bad consequences for the U.S. and the U.K., for starters. He thought it would destabilize these countries. He wanted the U.S. government to know. He's a very institution-oriented person."

During the previous two years, Steele had been sending Winer informal reports, gratis, about raw intelligence that he'd picked up on Ukraine and related areas while working for commercial clients. Winer, who encouraged Steele to keep sending the reports, estimated that he had received more than a hundred and twenty of them by 2016. He and others at the State Department found the research full of insights. Winer recalls Victoria Nuland, the top official overseeing U.S. policy on Russia, expressing surprise at how timely Steele's reports were. A former top State Department official who read them said, "We found the reports about eighty per cent consistent with other sources we had. Occasionally, his sources appeared to exaggerate their knowledge or influence. But Steele also highlighted some players and back channels between Russia and Ukraine who became important later. So the reports had value."

In September, 2016, Steele briefed Winer on the dossier at a Washington hotel. Winer prepared a two-page sum-



mary and shared it with a few senior State Department officials. Among them were Nuland and Jon Finan, the director of policy planning and the chief of staff to Secretary of State John Kerry. For several days, Finan weighed whether or not to burden Kerry with the information. He'd found the summary highly disturbing, but he didn't know how to assess its claims. Eventually, he decided that, since others knew, his boss should know, too.

When Kerry was briefed, though, he

didn't think there was any action that he could take. He asked if F.B.I. agents knew about the dossier, and, after being assured that they did, that was apparently the end of it. Finan agreed with Kerry's assessment, and put the summary in his safe, and never took it out again. Nuland's reaction was much the same. She told Winer to tell Steele to take his dossier to the F.B.I. The so-called Deep State, it seems, hardly jumped into action against Trump.

"No one wanted to touch it," Winer said. Obama Administration officials were mindful of the Hatch Act, which forbids government employees to use their positions to influence political elections. The State Department officials didn't know who was funding Steele's research, but they could see how politically explosive it was. So they backed away.

Steele believed that the Russians were engaged in the biggest electoral crime in U.S. history, and wondered why the F.B.I. and the State Department didn't seem to be taking the threat seriously. Likening it to the attack on Pearl Harbor, he felt that President Obama needed to make a speech to alert the country. He also thought that Obama should privately warn Putin that unless he stopped meddling the U.S. would retaliate with a cyberattack so devastating it would shut Russia down.

Steele wasn't aware that by August, 2016, a similar debate was taking place inside the Obama White House and the U.S. intelligence agencies. According to an article by the *Washington Post*, that month the C.I.A. sent what the paper described as "an intelligence bombshell" to President Obama, warning him that Putin was directly involved in a Russian cyber campaign aimed at disrupting the Presidential election—and helping Trump win. Robert Hannigan, then the head of the U.K.'s intelligence service the G.C.H.Q., had recently flown to Washington and briefed the C.I.A.'s director, John Brennan, on a stream of illicit communications between Trump's team and Moscow that had been intercepted. (The content of these intercepts has not become public.) But, as the *Post* noted, the C.I.A.'s assessment that the Russians were interfering specifically to boost Trump was not yet accepted by other



*"I'm afraid I'm kind of a klutz."*

intelligence agencies, and it wasn't until days before the Inauguration that major U.S. intelligence agencies had unanimously endorsed this view.

In the meantime, the White House was unsure how to respond. Earlier this year, at the Council on Foreign Relations, former Vice-President Joe Biden revealed that, after Presidential daily briefings, he and Obama "would sit there" and ask each other, "What the hell are we going to do?" The U.S. eventually sent a series of stern messages to the Russians, the most pointed of which took place when Obama pulled Putin aside on September 5th, at a G20 summit in China, and reportedly warned him, "Better stop, or else."

But Obama and his top advisers did not want to take any action against Russia that might provoke a cyber war. And because it was so close to the election, they were wary about doing anything that could be construed as a ploy to help Clinton. All along, Trump had dismissed talk of Russian interference as a hoax, claiming that no one really knew who had hacked the D.N.C.: it could have been China, he said, or a guy from New Jersey, or "somebody sitting on their bed that weighs four hundred pounds." Trump had also warned his supporters that the election would be rigged against him, and Obama and his top aides were loath to further undermine the public's faith.

In early September, 2016, Obama

tried to get congressional leaders to issue a bipartisan statement condemning Russia's meddling in the election. He reasoned that if both parties signed on the statement couldn't be attacked as political. The intelligence community had recently informed the Gang of Eight—the leaders of both parties and the ranking representatives on the Senate and House Intelligence Committees—that Russia was acting on behalf of Trump. But one Gang of Eight member, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, expressed skepticism about the Russians' role, and refused to sign a bipartisan statement condemning Russia. After that, Obama, instead of issuing a statement himself, said nothing.

Steele anxiously asked his American counterparts what else could be done to alert the country. One option was to go to the press. Simpson wasn't all that worried, though. As he recalled in his subsequent congressional testimony, "We were operating under the assumption at that time that Hillary Clinton was going to win the election, and so there was no urgency to it."

Contemporaneous F.B.I. text messages disclosed recently by the *Wall Street Journal* reflect a similar complacency. In August, 2016, two F.B.I. employees, Lisa Page and Peter Strzok, texted about investigating possible collusion between Trump and the Russians. "OMG I CAN-

NOT BELIEVE WE ARE SERIOUSLY

LOOKING AT THESE ALLEGATIONS AND THE PERVASIVE CONNECTIONS," Strzok wrote. Page suggested that they could take their time, because there was little reason to worry that Clinton would lose. But Strzok disagreed, warning that they should push ahead, anyway, as "an insurance policy" in case Trump was elected—like "the unlikely event you die before you're 40."

When excerpts of these texts first became public, Trump defenders such as Trey Gowdy seized on them as proof that the F.B.I. had schemed to devise "an insurance policy" to keep Trump from getting elected. But a reading of the full text chain makes it clear that the agents were discussing whether or not they needed to focus urgently on investigating collusion.

In late summer, Fusion set up a series of meetings, at the Tabard Inn, in Washington, between Steele and a handful of national-security reporters. These encounters were surely sanctioned in some way by Fusion's client, the Clinton campaign. The sessions were off the record, but because Steele has since disclosed having participated in them I can confirm that I attended one of them. Despite Steele's generally cool manner, he seemed distraught about the Russians' role in the election. He did not distribute his dossier, provided no documentary evidence, and was so careful about guarding his sources that there was virtually no way to follow up. At the time, neither *The New Yorker* nor any other news organization ran a story about the allegations.

Inevitably, though, word of the dossier began to spread through Washington. A former State Department official recalls a social gathering where he danced around the subject with the British Ambassador, Sir Kim Darroch. After exchanging cryptic hints, to make sure that they were both in the know, he asked the Ambassador, "Is this guy Steele legit?" The Ambassador replied, "Absolutely." Brennan, then the C.I.A. director, also heard the rumors. (Nunes reportedly plans to examine Steele's interactions with the C.I.A. and the State Department next.) But Brennan said recently, on "Meet the Press," that he heard just "snippets" about the dossier "in press circles," emphasizing that he didn't see the dossier until well after the election, and



said that “it did not play any role whatsoever” in the intelligence community’s appraisal of Russian election meddling. Brennan said of the dossier, “It was up to the F.B.I. to see whether or not they could verify any of it.”

It wasn’t until October 7, 2016, that anyone in the Obama Administration spoke publicly about Russia’s interference. James Clapper, Obama’s director of National Intelligence, and Jeh Johnson, the head of the Department of Homeland Security, issued a joint statement saying that the U.S. intelligence community was “confident” that Russia had directed the hacking of the Democratic National Committee’s e-mails. James Comey, then the F.B.I. director, had reportedly changed his mind about issuing a public statement, deciding that it was too close to the election to make such a politically charged assertion.

In a normal political climate, the U.S. government’s announcement that a foreign power had attacked one of the two dominant parties in the midst of a Presidential election would have received enormous attention. But it was almost instantly buried by two other shocking news events. Thirty minutes after the statement was released, the *Washington Post* brought to light the “Access Hollywood” tape, in which Trump describes how his celebrity status had allowed him to “grab” women “by the pussy.” A few hours after that, WikiLeaks, evidently in an effort to bail out Trump by changing the subject, started posting the private e-mails of John Podesta, Clinton’s campaign chairman. The intelligence community’s assessment was barely noticed.

Steele finally met again with the F.B.I. in early October of 2016. This time, he went to Rome to speak with a team of agents, who avidly asked him for everything he had. The news generated by the publication of the D.N.C. e-mails had triggered the change. It had led the Australians to reconsider the importance of George Papadopoulos’s claims, and to alert American authorities. On July 31, 2016, the F.B.I. had launched a formal investigation.

The agents asked Steele about Papadopoulos, and he said that he hadn’t heard anything about him. After the meeting, Steele told Simpson that the

Bureau had been amassing “other intelligence” about Russia’s scheme. As Simpson later told the Senate Judiciary Committee, F.B.I. agents now “believed Chris’s information might be credible.” Although the Bureau had paid Steele for past work, he was not paid for his help on the Trump investigation. Orbis remained under contract to Fusion, and Steele helped the F.B.I. voluntarily. (He did request compensation for travelling to Rome, but he never received any.)

Soon after the meeting in Rome, the F.B.I. successfully petitioned the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court for a warrant to spy on Carter Page. Trump’s defenders have accused the Bureau of relying on politically motivated smears to spy on Trump’s campaign, but by then Page was no longer an adviser to Trump, and the F.B.I. had collected information in addition to what had been supplied by Steele.

The Bureau encouraged Steele to send any relevant information he came across, and that October he passed on a questionable item—a bit of amateur sleuthing that had been done by someone he’d never met, a former journalist and self-styled investigator named Cody Shearer. Jonathan Winer, Steele’s friend at the State Department, had shared with him an unfinished memo written by Shearer. Not only did it claim that the F.S.B. had incriminating videotapes of Trump having sex in Moscow; it also made wild allegations that leaders of former Soviet states had given huge payments to Trump family members. Steele wasn’t aware that Shearer had longtime ties to the Clintons, as did Sidney Blumenthal, a Clinton ally, who had given Shearer’s report to Winer. Steele had never met Blumenthal, either, but he dutifully jotted down the chain of custody on the cover of the report before sending it on to the F.B.I., with the caveat that he couldn’t vouch for its credibility. He noted, though, that some of the findings were “remarkably similar” to Orbis’s.

Trump’s defenders have seized on the Shearer memo, which Steele didn’t write, using it to argue that Steele’s research

was politically tainted by the Clintons. Sean Hannity’s official Web site carried the inaccurate headline “CHRISTOPHER STEELE AUTHORED ANOTHER DOSSIER, USED CLINTON CONTACTS.”

As the election approached, the relationship between Steele and the F.B.I. grew increasingly tense. He couldn’t understand why the government wasn’t publicizing Trump’s ties to Russia. He was anguished that the American voting public remained in the dark. Steele confided in a longtime friend at the Justice Department, an Associate Deputy Attorney General, Bruce Ohr (whose wife, Nellie Ohr, was briefly a contractor for Fusion). In a memo to the F.B.I., Bruce Ohr recalled Steele saying that, given what he had discovered, he “was desperate that Donald Trump not get elected and was passionate about him not being President.” According to people familiar with the matter, Ohr and other officials urged Steele not to be so upset about the F.B.I.’s secrecy, assuring him that, in the U.S., potentially prejudicial investigations of political figures were always kept quiet, especially when an election was imminent.

Steele was therefore shocked when, on October 28, 2016, Comey sent a letter to congressional leaders: the F.B.I. had come across new e-mails bearing on its previously closed investigation into Hillary Clinton’s use of a private server as Secretary of State. He said that these e-mails required immediate review. The

announcement plunged Clinton’s campaign into chaos. Two days before the election, Comey made a second announcement, clearing her of wrongdoing, but by that point her campaign’s momentum had stalled.

To Steele, the F.B.I., by making an incriminating statement so close to Election Day, seemed to be breaking a rule that he’d been told was inviolable. And, given what he—and very few others—knew about the F.B.I.’s Trump investigation, it also seemed that the Bureau had one standard for Clinton and another for her opponent. “Chris was concerned that something was happening at the F.B.I.,” Simpson later told the House Intelligence Committee. “We



were very concerned that the information that we had about the Russians trying to interfere in the election was going to be covered up.” Simpson and Steele thought that “it would only be fair if the world knew that both candidates were under investigation.”

At Fusion’s urging, Steele decided to speak, on background, to the press. Identified only as a “former Western intelligence officer,” he told David Corn, of *Mother Jones*, that he had provided information to the F.B.I. as part of a “pretty substantial inquiry” into Trump’s ties to Russia. He noted, “This is something of huge significance, way above party politics.”

The F.B.I., which had hoped to protect its ongoing probe from public view, was furious. Nunes, in his memo, claimed that Steele was “suspended and then terminated” as a source. In reality, the break was mutual, precipitated by Steele’s act of conscience.

Inside the Clinton campaign, John Podesta, the chairman, was stunned by the news that the F.B.I. had launched a full-blown investigation into Trump, especially one that was informed by research underwritten by the Clinton campaign. Podesta had authorized Robby Mook, the campaign manager, to handle budget matters, and Mook had approved Perkins Coie’s budget request for opposition research without knowing who was producing it. Podesta and Mook have maintained that they had no idea a former foreign intelligence officer was on the Democrats’ payroll until the *Mother Jones* article appeared, and that they didn’t read the dossier until BuzzFeed posted it online. Far from a secret campaign weapon, Steele turned out to be a secret kept from the campaign.

On November 8, 2016, Steele stayed up all night, watching the U.S. election returns. Trump’s surprise victory hit Orbis hard. A staff memo went out forgiving anyone who wanted to stay home and hide under his duvet. The news had one immediate consequence for Steele. He believed that Trump now posed a national-security threat to his country, too. He soon shared his research with a

senior British official. The official carefully went through the details with Steele, but it isn’t clear whether the British government acted on his information.

The election was over, but Steele kept trying to alert American authorities. Later that November, he authorized a trusted mentor—Sir Andrew Wood, a former British Ambassador to Moscow—to inform Senator John McCain of the existence of his dossier. Wood, an unpaid informal adviser to Orbis, and Steele agreed that McCain, the hawkish chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, should know what was going on. Wood told me, “It was simply a matter of duty.” Steele had gone to him before the

election for counsel. They’d discussed the possibility that Steele’s sources in Russia were wrong, or spreading disinformation, but concluded that none of them had a motive to lie; moreover, they had taken considerable risks to themselves to get the truth out. “I sensed he was distinctly alarmed,” Wood told me. “I don’t doubt his good faith at all. It’s absurd for anyone to suggest he was engaged in political tricks.”

The week before Thanksgiving, Wood briefed McCain at the Halifax International Security Forum. McCain was deeply concerned. He asked a former aide, David Kramer, to go to England to meet Steele. Kramer, a Russia expert who had served at the State Department, went over the dossier with Steele for hours. After Kramer promised to share the document only with McCain, Steele arranged for Kramer to receive a copy in Washington. But a former national-security official who spoke with Kramer at the time told me that one of Kramer’s ideas was to have McCain confront Trump with the evidence, in the hope that Trump would resign. “He would tell Trump, ‘The Russians have got you,’” the former official told me. (A lawyer for Kramer maintains that Kramer never considered getting Trump to resign and never promised to show the dossier only to McCain.) Ultimately, though, McCain and Kramer agreed that McCain should take the dossier to the head of the F.B.I. On December 9th, McCain handed



Comey a copy of the dossier. The meeting lasted less than ten minutes, because, to McCain’s surprise, the F.B.I. had possessed a copy since the summer. According to the former national-security official, when Kramer learned about the meeting his reaction was “Shit, if they’ve had it all this time, why didn’t they *do* something?” Kramer then heard that the dossier was an open secret among journalists, too. He asked, “Is there anyone in Washington who *doesn’t* know about this?”

On January 5, 2017, it became clear that at least two Washingtonians remained in the dark about the dossier: the President and the Vice-President. That day, in a top-secret Oval Office meeting, the chiefs of the nation’s top intelligence agencies briefed Obama and Biden and some national-security officials for the first time about the dossier’s allegation that Trump’s campaign team may have colluded with the Russians. As one person present later told me, “No one understands that at the White House we weren’t briefed about the F.B.I.’s investigations. We had no information on collusion. All we saw was what the Russians were doing. The F.B.I. puts anything about Americans in a lockbox.”

The main purpose of the Oval Office meeting was to run through a startling report that the U.S. intelligence chiefs were about to release to the public. It contained the agencies’ unanimous conclusion that, during the Presidential campaign, Putin had directed a cyber campaign aimed at getting Trump elected. But, before releasing the report, the intelligence chiefs—James Clapper, the director of National Intelligence; Admiral Mike Rogers, the N.S.A. director; Brennan; and Comey—shared a highly classified version with Obama, Biden, and the other officials.

The highly classified report included a two-page appendix about the dossier. Comey briefed the group on it. According to three former government officials familiar with the meeting, he didn’t name Steele but said that the appendix summarized information obtained by a former intelligence officer who had previously worked with the F.B.I. and had come forward with troubling information. Comey laid out the dossier’s allegations that there had been numerous



contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian officials, and that there may have been deals struck between them. Comey also mentioned some of the sexual details in the dossier, including the alleged golden-showers *kompromat*.

"It was chilling," the meeting participant recalls.

Obama stayed silent. All through the campaign, he and others in his Administration had insisted on playing by the rules, and not interfering unduly in the election, to the point that, after Trump's victory, some critics accused them of political negligence. The Democrats, far from being engaged in a political conspiracy with Steele, had been politically paralyzed by their high-mindedness.

Biden asked, "How seriously should we take this?" Comey responded that the F.B.I. had not corroborated the details in the dossier, but he said that portions of it were "consistent" with what the U.S. intelligence community had obtained from other channels. He also said that the F.B.I. had "confidence" in the dossier's author—a careful but definite endorsement—because it had worked not only with him but with many of his sources and sub-sources, whose identities the Bureau knew. "He's proven credible in the past, and so has his network," Comey said.

"If this is true, this is huge!" Biden exclaimed.

Someone asked how intelligence officials planned to handle the dossier with Trump. Comey explained that he'd decided to brief the President-elect about it the next day. He would do it on his own, he said, to avoid unnecessary embarrassment. But he thought that Trump needed to know about the dossier, even if the allegations were false, for two reasons: it could prove "impactful" if the dossier became public, and the dossier could be used as leverage over the President-elect. Trump later suggested that Comey had actually used the dossier to get leverage over him, but, according to the officials familiar with the meeting, Comey's motive was to protect the President-elect. In fact, if Comey had wanted to use the dossier as leverage, he could have done so months earlier, before Trump was elected, since it had been in the F.B.I.'s possession.

Comey's meeting with the President-elect, in a conference room at

Trump Tower, did not go well. Neither he nor Trump has disclosed details of their exchange, but Comey later released a public statement in which he said that as soon as he left the building he "felt compelled" to memorialize in writing what had occurred. He'd never felt the need to take such a legal step during the Obama years. Later, when he was questioned by a Senate panel, Comey explained that he had done so because of the "nature of the person," adding, "I was honestly concerned he might lie about the nature of our meeting." The briefing established a rocky dynamic that culminated in Trump's dismissing Comey, and with Trump adopting a hostile posture toward the intelligence and law-enforcement agencies investigating him.

Republican critics have accused the intelligence agencies of having blended Steele's work with their own investigations. But the F.B.I., by relegating the dossier to an appendix, deliberately separated it from the larger intelligence-community report. Steele has told friends that this approach left him exposed. The F.B.I. never asked his permission to do this. "They threw me under the bus," Steele has complained to friends.

Unsurprisingly, the salacious news

leaked in no time. Four days after Comey briefed Trump, CNN reported that the President-elect had been briefed on a scandalous dossier supplied by a former British intelligence operative. Almost instantly, BuzzFeed posted a copy of Steele's dossier online, arguing that the high-level briefing made it a matter of public interest. BuzzFeed has declined to reveal its source for the dossier, but both Orbis and Fusion have denied supplying it. By a process of elimination, speculation has centered on McCain's aide, Kramer, who has not responded to inquiries about it, and whose congressional testimony is sealed.

Trump immediately denounced CNN's report as "fake news," and BuzzFeed as "a failing pile of garbage." He called the document "crap" compiled by "sick people," and at a news conference at Trump Tower he insisted that the golden-showers episode couldn't be true, because he was "very much of a germophobe."

The day after BuzzFeed posted the dossier, the *Wall Street Journal* identified Steele as its author. In England, reporters peered in his windows and tracked down his relatives, including the siblings of his deceased wife. Two reporters from RT, a Russian state news agency, seemed especially aggressive in staking



out his house. In response, Steele and his family went into hiding. They reportedly left their three cats with neighbors, and Steele grew a beard.

The dossier's publication caused a series of repercussions. Aleksey Gubarev, the Russian Internet entrepreneur, sued Steele and Orbis, and also BuzzFeed, for libel. He said the dossier falsely claimed that his companies, Webzilla and XBT Holding, had aided the Russian hacking of the D.N.C. (Steele's lawyers have said that the dossier's publication was unforeseen, so he shouldn't be held responsible. BuzzFeed has argued that the content was not libelous.) Pretrial maneuvering in the libel case has resulted in a court ordering Gubarev to disclose whether he or his companies are under criminal investigation. His answer may shed some light on the dossier's depiction of him as a questionable character.

In Russia, there were rumors of a more primitive kind of justice taking place. During Glenn Simpson's testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee, his lawyer asserted that "somebody's already been killed as a result of the publication of this dossier." Who that could be has been the subject of much media speculation. One possibility that has been mentioned is Oleg Erovinkin, a former F.S.B. officer and top aide to Igor Sechin, the Rosneft president. On December 26, 2016, Erovinkin was found dead in his car. No official cause of death has been cited. No evidence has emerged that Erovinkin was a Steele source, and in fact Special Counsel Mueller is believed to be investigating a different death that is possibly related to the dossier. (A representative for Mueller declined to answer questions for this article.) Meanwhile, around the same time that Erovinkin died, Russian authorities charged a cybersecurity expert

and two F.S.B. officers with treason.

In the spring of 2017, after eight weeks in hiding, Steele gave a brief statement to the media, announcing his intention of getting back to work. On the advice of his lawyers, he hasn't spoken publicly since. But Steele talked at length with Mueller's investigators in September. It isn't known what they discussed, but, given the seriousness with which Steele views the subject, those who know him suspect that he shared many of his sources, and much else, with the Mueller team.

One subject that Steele is believed to have discussed with Mueller's investigators is a memo that he wrote in late November, 2016, after his contract with Fusion had ended. This memo, which did not surface publicly with the others, is shorter than the rest, and is based on one source, described as "a senior Russian official." The official said that he was merely relaying talk circulating in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but what he'd heard was astonishing: people were saying that the Kremlin had intervened to block Trump's initial choice for Secretary of State, Mitt Romney. (During Romney's run for the White House in 2012, he was notably hawkish on Russia, calling it the single greatest threat to the U.S.) The memo said that the Kremlin, through unspecified channels, had asked Trump to appoint someone who would be prepared to lift Ukraine-related sanctions, and who would cooperate on security issues of interest to Russia, such as the conflict in Syria. If what the source heard was true, then a foreign power was exercising pivotal influence over U.S. foreign policy—and an incoming President.

As fantastical as the memo sounds, subsequent events could be said to support it. In a humiliating public spectacle, Trump dangled the post before Romney until early December, then rejected him. There are plenty of domestic political reasons that Trump may have turned against Romney. Trump loyalists, for instance, noted Romney's public opposition to Trump during the campaign. Roger Stone, the longtime Trump aide, has suggested that Trump was vengefully tormenting Romney, and had never seriously considered him. (Romney declined to comment. The White House said that he was never a first



*"The delight of an evening cocktail is hard to overstate."*



choice for the role and declined to comment about any communications that the Trump team may have had with Russia on the subject.) In any case, on December 13, 2016, Trump gave Rex Tillerson, the C.E.O. of ExxonMobil, the job. The choice was a surprise to most, and a happy one in Moscow, because Tillerson's business ties with the Kremlin were long-standing and warm. (In 2011, he brokered a historic partnership between ExxonMobil and Rosneft.) After the election, Congress imposed additional sanctions on Russia, in retaliation for its interference, but Trump and Tillerson have resisted enacting them.

Eighteen months after the dossier's publication, Steele has impassioned detractors on both the left and the right. On the left, Stephen Cohen, a Russia scholar and *Nation* contributor, has denied the existence of any collusion between Trump and Russia, and has accused Steele of being part of a powerful "fourth branch of government," comprising intelligence agencies whose anti-Russia and anti-Trump biases have run amok. On the right, the *Washington Examiner's* Byron York has championed Grassley and Graham's criminal referral, arguing that Steele has a "credibility issue," because he purportedly lied to the F.B.I. about talking to the press. But did Steele lie? The Justice Department has not filed charges against him. The most serious accusation these critics make is that the F.B.I. tricked the FISA Court into granting a warrant to spy on Trump associates on the basis of false and politically motivated opposition research. If true, this would be a major abuse of power. But the Bureau didn't trick the court—it openly disclosed that Steele's funding was political. Moreover, Steele's dossier was only part of what the FISA warrant rested on. According to the Democrats' Intelligence Committee report, the Justice Department obtained information "that corroborated Steele's reporting" through "multiple independent sources."

It's too early to make a final judgment about how much of Steele's dossier will be proved wrong, but a number of Steele's major claims have been backed up by subsequent disclosures.

His allegation that the Kremlin favored Trump in 2016 and was offering his campaign dirt on Hillary has been borne out. So has his claim that the Kremlin and WikiLeaks were working together to release the D.N.C.'s e-mails. Key elements of Steele's memos on Carter Page have held up, too, including the claim that Page had secret meetings in Moscow with Rosneft and Kremlin officials. Steele may have named the wrong oil-company official, but, according to recent congressional disclosures, he was correct that a top Rosneft executive talked to Page about a payoff. According to the Democrats' report, when Page was asked if a Rosneft executive had offered him a "potential sale of a significant percentage of Rosneft," Page said, "He may have briefly mentioned it."

And, just as the Kremlin allegedly feared, damaging financial details have surfaced about Manafort's dealings with Ukraine officials. Further, his suggestion that Trump had "agreed to sideline Russian intervention in Ukraine as a campaign issue" seems to have been confirmed by the pro-Russia changes that Trump associates made to the Republican platform. Special Counsel Mueller's various indictments of Manafort have also strengthened aspects of the dossier.

Indeed, it's getting harder every day to claim that Steele was simply spreading lies, now that three former Trump campaign officials—Flynn, Papadopoulos, and Rick Gates, who served as deputy campaign chairman—have all pleaded guilty to criminal charges, and appear to be cooperating with the investigation. And, of course, Mueller has indicted thirteen Russian nationals for waging the kind of digital warfare that Steele had warned about.

On January 9th, Trump's personal attorney, Michael Cohen, filed a hundred-million-dollar defamation lawsuit against Fusion. He also sued BuzzFeed. Cohen tweeted, "Enough is enough of the #fake #RussianDossier." Steele mentioned Cohen several times in the dossier, and claimed that Cohen met with Russian operatives in Prague, in the late summer of 2016, to pay them off and

cover up the Russian hacking operation. Cohen denies that he's ever set foot in Prague, and has produced his passport to prove it. A congressional official has told Politico, however, that an inquiry into the allegation is "still active." And, since the dossier was published, several examples have surfaced of Cohen making secretive payments to cover up other potentially damaging stories. Cohen recently acknowledged to the *Times* that he personally paid Stephanie Clifford, a porn star who goes by the name Stormy Daniels, a hundred and thirty thousand dollars; it is widely believed that Trump and Clifford had a secret sexual relationship.

In London, Steele is back at work, attending to other cases. Orbis has landed several new clients as a result of the publicity surrounding the dossier. The week after it became public, the company received two thousand job applications.

John Sipher, the former C.I.A. officer, predicts that Mueller's probe will render the final verdict on Steele's dossier. "People who say it's all garbage, or all true, are being politically biased," Sipher said. "There's enough there to be worthy of further study. Professionals need to look at travel records, phone records, bank records, foreign police-service cameras, and check it all out. It will take professional investigators to run it to ground." He believes that Mueller, whose F.B.I. he worked with, "is a hundred percent doing that."

Until then, Sipher said, Steele, as a former English spook, is the perfect political foil: "The Trump supporters can attack the messenger, because no one knows him or understands him, so you can paint him any way you want." Strobe Talbott, a Russia expert who served as Deputy Secretary of State in the Clinton Administration, and who has known Steele professionally for ten years, has watched the spectacle in Washington with regret. Talbott regards Steele as a "smart, careful, professional, and congenial" colleague who "knows the post-Soviet space, and is exactly what he says he is." Yet, Talbott said, "they're trying to turn him into political polonium—touch him and you die." ♦



# The Poltroon Husband

Joseph O'Neill





Five years ago, we sold the Phoenix house and bought land in Flagstaff and built a house there—our final abode, I called it. Jayne objected to this designation, but I defended myself with what I termed “an argument from reality”—which was also objected to by Jayne, who said I was using “an argument from being really annoying.”

“Are you saying this isn’t going to be our final abode?” I said. “And don’t talk to me about hospices or nuthouses. You know what I mean. This is the last place you and I will call home. This is our final abode.”

I looked up “abode.” It refers to a habitual residence, of course, but it derives from an Old English verb meaning “to wait.” The expression “abide with me” can be traced back to the same source. An abode is a place of waiting. Waiting for what? Not to be a downer, but I think we all know the answer. When I shared my research with Jayne, she said, “I see that your darkness is somewhat useful to you, but it’s a bit intellectually weak.” This delighted me.

The final abode is on a wooded, intermittently waterlogged double lot on South San Francisco Street, near the university. The neighborhood was quite ramshackle when we moved in, and to this day it hosts a significant population of indigent men. They come to Flagstaff with good reason, in my opinion: the climate is lovely in this desert oasis seven thousand feet above the sea, there are good social services, and the townsfolk are kindhearted, I would claim, although it must be noted that the city only recently decriminalized begging. I took part in the protests against the law. Jayne, whose politics on this point were the same as mine, was disinclined to man the barricades, so to speak. We, the protesters, chanted slogans and held up placards and marched along Beaver Street, where some of us got into good trouble, to use the catchphrase: we sat down in the middle of the road and symbolically panhandled. I was among those sitting down but not among those randomly arrested by the cops, much to Jayne’s relief.

Our house, the very clever work of a local architect, consists of five shipping containers raised several feet above the ground. Half of one container functions as a garden office and the other

half functions as a covered footbridge over the stream that runs through our land; previously, you had to negotiate a pair of old planks. The covered bridge was my idea. It makes me stupidly proud when visitors pause to enjoy the view through the bridge’s window: the small brown watercourse, the sunlit thicket. How fortunate we were to find this magical overgrown downtown woodland. Road traffic is imperceptible from the house, and, when the maples and the river birches are in leaf, we cannot be seen by anyone walking by. It is a wonderfully private, precious urban place.

One night, Jayne grabs my wrist. We are in bed.

“Did you hear that?” she says.

“Hear what?”

Jayne is still holding my wrist, though not as tightly as before.

“Shush,” she says.

We listen. I am about to declare the all-clear when there’s a noise—a kind of thud, as if a person had collided with the sofa.

Jayne and I look at each other. “What was that?” she says. She is whispering.

We listen some more. Another noise, not as loud, but also thud-like.

“It could be a skunk,” I say. We have a lot of skunks around here. Skunks are born intruders.

“Is it downstairs?”

It’s hard for me to give an answer. Although the house has two stories and numerous dedicated “zones,” to use the architect’s phrase, only the bathrooms are *rooms*—that is, spaces enclosed by four walls and a door. Otherwise the house comprises a single acoustical unit. This can be confusing. Often a noise made in one zone will sound as if it emanates from another.

Now there is a louder noise that must be described as a *cough*. Something or someone is either coughing or making a coughing sound down there. It’s definitely coming from inside the house, I think.

“I’d better take a look,” I say. A little to my surprise, Jayne doesn’t disagree. I turn off my bedside light. “Let’s listen again,” I say.

For several minutes, Jayne and I sit up in bed in the darkness and the quiet. We don’t hear anything. Actually, that’s incorrect: we don’t hear anything *un-*

*toward*. You always hear something if you listen hard enough. The susurrations of the ceiling fan. The faint roar of the comforter.

“I think it’s fine,” I finally say.

“What’s fine?”

“It was nothing,” I say. “We’re always hearing noises.” That’s basically true. Often, at night, a racket of clawed feet on the roof produces the false impression that animals have penetrated the abode.

“Let’s call 911,” Jayne says.

I don’t have to tell her that our phones are downstairs, in the kitchen, plugged into chargers. I say, “Sweetie, there’s no need to worry. Nothing has happened.”

“Shouldn’t we check?” she says.

What she’s really suggesting is that I should check—that the checker should be me. I should get out of bed and go downstairs and see what or who is making the noises. I feel this isn’t called for. Those noises happened a long time ago, is how I feel about it. I feel that they are historical facts.

Jayne says, “I won’t be able to sleep.”

I wouldn’t say that she says this loudly, but she’s definitely no longer speaking in what you’d call a low voice.

Jayne says, “I’ll just lie here all night, wondering what those noises are.”

What those noises *were*, I want to say. For some reason, I feel very exhausted.

Jayne says, “Honey, it’s not safe.”

I hear her. She’s arguing that, even if we could fall asleep, it would be unsafe to do so in circumstances in which we’ve heard thuds and coughs of an unknown character and origin. I say, “You’re right.”

I don’t move, however. I stay right where I am, in bed.

It’s important to examine this moment with some care and, above all, to avoid drawing simplistic psychological conclusions. In that moment, which I clearly recall, the following occurred: I was overcome by a *dreamlike inertness*. I was not experiencing fear as such. I have been afraid and I know what it is to be afraid. This wasn’t that. This was what I’d call an *oneiric paralysis*.

Thus, I could intuit that my wife was looking at me, yet my own eyes, open but unaccountably immobilized, were directed straight ahead, toward some point in the darkness. I lacked the

wherewithal to turn my head and return her look. Her bedside lamp lit up, presumably by her hand. I sensed her climbing out of bed. She appeared at the foot of the bed. There she was visible to me. She fixed her hair into a bun and put on a dressing gown I didn't know existed. She was as beautiful as ever, that much I could take in. She said, "I'll go down myself."

Here I became most strongly conscious of my incapacitation—because I found myself unable to intervene. But for this incapacity, I would surely have pointed out that she was taking a crazy risk. I would have reminded her that Arizona is teeming with guns and gunmen. I would have proposed an alternative to venturing alone downstairs. In short, I would have stopped her.

To be clear, my inability to speak up wasn't because I'd lost my voice. It was because the content of my thoughts amounted to a blank. I was the subject of a *mental whiteout*.

My beloved left the zone. I heard her footfall as she went down the stairs.

My symptoms improved a little. I found myself able to move my feet over the border of the bed—though no farther. I could not escape a sedentary posture. I *perforce* awaited the sound of whatever next happened.

Which was: a soft utterance. Certainly it was a human voice, or a human-like voice. Then came a pause, then a repetition of the utterance, equally soft, and then what sounded like a responsive utterance. I heard a movement being made, a movement I understood in terms of *clumsiness*. Then came a series of sounds made by bodily movements, it seemed, then another, slightly longer speech episode involving one voice or more than one voice—I couldn't tell for sure. What was being said and being done, and by whom, and in which zone: all these facts were beyond me. I was on the bed's edge—that is to say, still bedridden. This state of affairs persisted for a period that even in retrospect remains incalculable: soft utterances belonging, it seemed, although I could not be sure, to more than one speaker; pauses; the sounds of movements human or animal; and my own stasis. At any rate, there eventually came a moment when the light in the living zone was switched on, and very soon after that I heard the dis-

## THE GALLEONS

The galleons want to go to the opera  
because they want to hear emotions as big as their emotions.

When the spurned lover sings  
his booming aria, they think of the oceans that cover

the world almost completely.  
When the young maid sings her way

to being the queen of a kingdom,  
they think of the months-long journeys that will pick off

their crews one by one, in terrifying  
weather followed by boredom. And then the galleons want

to shop in the mall in the suburbs.  
Everything they see there is like the secrets

they once carried in their holds.  
Racks of blouses like sacks of gold, tiers of blenders

like crates of silver. The food courts  
remind them of their full bellies before the trips home,

the weight in the center of the body  
after it has eaten everything, the stomach glossy and pink

as a shopping bag. And then the galleons  
want to visit the boy who loves making model boats

tinctive exhalation of the refrigerator door being opened, and the splashing, or plashing, of a liquid being poured into a glass. Here, my motive powers returned as mysteriously as they had abandoned me. I got to my feet and went down.

Jayne is seated at the kitchen table with a glass of milk. She has taken to drinking milk regularly, for the calcium: one of her greatest fears is that she'll lose bone density and end up stooped, like her mother.

"Good idea," I say, and I pour myself a glass of milk, too, even though my bone density isn't something I lose sleep over. I sit down across the table from her.

Jayne is on her phone, scrolling. I wait for her to send a text or make a call, because she doesn't pick up her gadget for any other reason. She keeps scrolling, though, almost as if she's just passing time.

I've never seen her in any kind of dressing gown before. This one has an old-fashioned pattern of brown-and-green tartan. She looks good in it. "I like your dressing gown," I say.

"Thank you," she says. "I thought it might come in useful."

I survey the surroundings. I see nothing amiss or unusual. Nor can I smell anything out of the ordinary.

Jayne finishes her milk. "I think I'll go back to bed now," she says.

"Yes," I say. "It's late." I go up with her.

In the morning, we follow our routine. I make scrambled eggs and coffee for two, we consume the eggs and coffee, and we retire to our respective work zones: I to the garden office, where I do the consultancy stuff that occupies me for about five hours a day, six days a week; Jayne to the studio, which is her name for the zone of the house dedicated to her printmaking activities.



in the basement that his parents have given up  
to his hobby. Wearing a magnifying  
visor, at a table with glues and tweezers and exact  
bits of wood, the boy puts together long ships  
and carracks in exquisite minute scale.  
The galleons approve of the galleon he has been making  
for months, imagining the huge tonnage  
of the actual ships, their cannons arrayed on the sides  
like judges. And then the galleons, on certain  
other days, want to go back to the forests  
they came from, to reel the blood-soaked narrative  
back to the stands of pines and oaks  
that will become their keels and decking,  
hulls and masts. Back to the mountains being mountains,  
their iron in the ground like gray thoughts.  
Back to the birds being birds.  
Back to the lakes being lakes, deeply shining,  
like the black velvet gloves of a prince in an old painting.

—Rick Barot

We are both very busy on this particular day and work longer and more intensely than usual, and at midday we separately grab a bite to eat. In the late afternoon, I check in on her.

"How's it going?" I say.

"Good," she says, all vagueness and preoccupation. She is standing at her worktable, her palms black with ink. She wears the green apron I know so well.

I peek over her shoulder. "Very nice," I say.

Jayne does not respond, which is to be expected.

"For tonight, I was thinking steak," I say.

"Yay," Jayne says. She loves steak if I make it.

So I step out and get the meat and cook it. I open a bottle of red wine. I serve the meat with grilled asparagus and sautéed potatoes.

"You don't like the steak?" I say. Jayne

has eaten only a mouthful of it. Otherwise she has finished her food—including two helpings of potatoes.

She says, "I'm not that hungry."

"Not hungry?" I say.

"Maybe I'll have some later."

I say to her, "What happened last night? When you went downstairs."

Jayne says, "You were right. It was nothing."

I say, "I heard voices. I heard you talking to someone."

"You did?" she says.

"You're saying those voices I heard were nothing?"

"You tell me," Jayne says.

"You were there," I say. "I wasn't. You tell me."

"Where were you?" she says. "In bed?" Now she is eating her steak.

I say, "You're hungry now?" I say, "Who were you talking to?"

Jayne says, "Are you sure you weren't dreaming?"

It must be said: I'm furious. "Can I get you anything else?" I say. "A glass of milk?"

I didn't press Jayne further. If there's one thing I'm not, it's an interrogator. I decided to bide my time. Jayne, who is a great one for marital candor and discussion, would open up to me sooner or later. Meanwhile, I held off telling her about my side of things: in particular, the bizarre condition to which I fell victim on that night—a *catastrophic neural stoppage*. My story went hand in hand with her story. I couldn't tell her mine unless she told me hers.

Three months have passed. Neither of us has brought up the subject.

The nocturnal noises have not reoccurred. There have been noises, of course, but none that have caused a disturbance. I may have played a role in this.

It has always been the case that, when Jayne and I call it a day, she goes upstairs while I linger downstairs in order to lock up, switch off the lights, perform a visual sweep, and generally satisfy myself that everything is shipshape and we can safely bed down. Lately, however, I have taken to staying downstairs after my patrol, if I can call it that. I sit in my armchair. All the lights have been turned off except for the lamp by the chair, so that I am, in effect, spotlighted, and clearly visible to any visitor. I remain seated for a period that varies between a half hour and a whole hour. I don't do anything. I remain alert. I offer myself for inspection.

"Are you coming up?" Jayne called down when I first began to do this.

"Yes," I answered. "I'm just seeing to a few things."

"O.K., well, come up soon," Jayne said. "I miss you."

A short while later, she was at the top of the stairs. "Love, I'm going to go to sleep soon," she said.

"You do that, my darling," I said. "Get yourself some shut-eye. You've worked hard."

"Is that new?" she said.

"It's my dressing gown," I said.

The dressing gown had been delivered that morning. It had bothered me, when I began these vigils, that I lacked appropriate attire. To watchfully occupy a chair was a pursuit that belonged neither to the day nor to the night; neither

to the world of action nor to the world of rest. Specifically, I wanted to remove my clothing at day's end and yet not sit downstairs dressed only in the pajamas I wear to bed. The solution was to put on a dressing gown.

Shopping for a dressing gown isn't straightforward. Not only is there the danger of ordering a bathrobe by mistake but also the danger of buying something that will make you look ridiculous. Eventually I found one made of dark-blue silk. I chose well. I enjoy slipping it on and fastening the sash and—because this, too, has become part of the ritual—wetting and combing my hair so that, unforeseeably, I am more spruce than I've been in years. I'm very much a jeans-and-lumberjack-shirt kind of guy.

"It looks nice on you," Jayne said. As was now the norm, she, too, was wearing her dressing gown. She added, laughing, "In a Hugh Hefner kind of way."

Was this an entirely friendly qualification? I couldn't tell; an unfamiliar opacity clouded Jayne in that moment. And when she got me monogrammed black slippers for my birthday—"To complete the Hef look"—the cloud suddenly returned. Still, I wear the slippers happily. And whenever I finally turn in, Jayne is always awake or half-awake and always rolls over on her side to hold me and always asks, "Is everything O.K.?" It is, I tell her.

When I'm sitting in my chair, I automatically compare any weird noises with what disturbed us that night—the thuds, the coughs. The comparison has not yet yielded an echo. I also replay in my mind what I heard when Jayne went downstairs, which sounded to me like a conversation between Jayne and another person, even though it may have been nothing and certainly came to nothing; and I find myself again looking forward to the day when Jayne will finally reminisce about the incident and will at last disclose what happened to her during those long moments when I found myself in a *veritable psychic captivity*, a state that I'll finally have the opportunity to describe to her—although it may be, because Jayne is given to worry, that it would be best if I protected her from learning about a biobehavioral ailment of such troubling neurophysiological dimensions. It wouldn't be the first time I've kept something

from her. I've never told her that, when she and I first met, I had reached a point in my life when it would comfort me to look around a room and figure out exactly how I might hang myself. Jayne is my rescuer from all of that.

It's quite possible that she has forgotten all about the night of the noises. Certainly, the alternative scenario is very improbable: that hers is a calculated muteness; that she is keeping the facts from me on purpose. It wouldn't be like Jayne to do such a thing. She can't abide tactical silences. Moreover, this silence would serve no purpose that I can see; therefore, it cannot be purposeful.

In the meantime, I've become quite the expert in what might be called *bionomic audio*: for example, I've learned that the chatter of skunks can resemble the chirping of birds. This sort of knowledge doesn't offer itself on a plate. It requires a physical deed. Several times I've stepped out of the abode, armed only with a flashlight, to investigate a noise. One night, pursuing a rapid scuttling in the undergrowth—it could have been a lot of things: the raccoon may be spotted in Flagstaff, and the gray fox, and the feral cat, and certainly the squirrel—I found myself in the middle of the woods without my flashlight. It's true that a "woods" is a sizable wooded area and that we're actually concerned with a "copse" here, but to me it seemed as if I were in the middle of a woods in the middle of the night, even if it was only about ten o'clock.

It was very dark. Our block has no street lights, and the nuisance of light trespass doesn't affect us in the slightest. We have only one next-door neighbor, and her property, hidden by oak trees and brush, has been scrupulously disilluminated in compliance with the dark-skies ordinances for which Flagstaff is so famous. I recently looked into installing motion-detecting lights around the house and immediately fell into a deep, scary pit of outdoor-lighting codes. Jayne was opposed to the very idea. "You'll just light up a bunch of rodents," she said. She said, "I refuse to live like a poltroon," which made me laugh. I love and admire her fiery verbal streak.

A "poltroon," I read, is an "utter coward," which I knew; I didn't know that

the word probably descends from the Old Italian *poltrire*, to laze around in bed, from *poltro*, bed. Interesting, I guess.

Where was I? In dark woods. But once my vision has adapted to the absence of light, of man's light, I am in bright woods. It is a paradox: dark skies, precisely because they're untainted by the pollution known as sky glow, are extraordinarily luminous. A strong lunar light penetrates the high black foliage and falls in a crazy silver scatter in the underwood. It's quite possible that starlight also plays a part in the woods' weird monochromatic brilliance, which has a powerfully camouflaging effect, in that every usually distinct thing—each plant and rock and patch of open ground—appears in a common uniform of sheen and shadow. This must account for the strange feeling of personal invisibility that comes over me. I lean against a tree—and am tree-like. I find myself calmly standing sentry there, part-clad in my mail of moonlight, and doing so in a state of such optical and auditory supervigilance that I perceive, with no trace of a startle reflex, the movements not only of the forest creatures as they hop and scamper and flit but even, through the blackened chaparral, the distant silhouette of a person who stands at a window on San Francisco. When my phone vibrates, it's as if I've pocketed a tremor of the earth.

"Love?" Jayne says. "Love, where are you?"

I inform her.

She says, "The woods? You mean the yard? Are you O.K.? You've been gone for half an hour."

I turn toward the abode. An upstairs window offers an enchanting rectangle of warm yellow light. Otherwise our abode partakes of the dark and of the woods.

I assure Jayne that all's well. A bit of me would like to say more—would like to let her know about my adventure in the silver forest.

"Come inside, love," Jayne says. She sounds worried, as well she might. She is a woman all alone in a house in the woods.

"I'll be right there," I say. "Sit tight. I'm on my way." ♦

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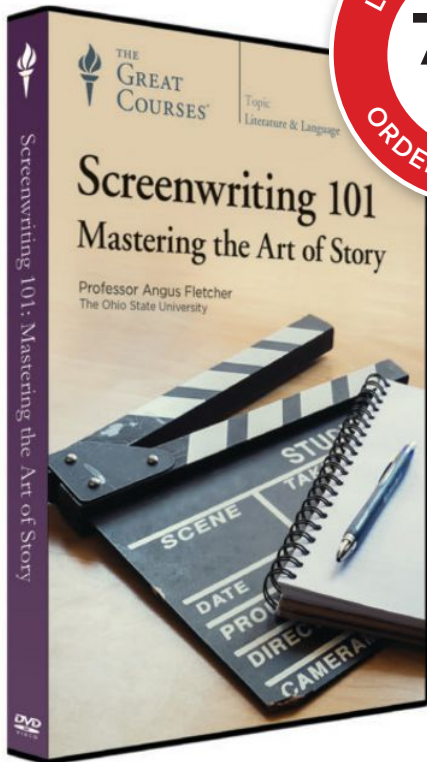
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Joseph O'Neill on the comedy of cowardice.





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# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## NIGHT MUSIC

*What Andrew Lloyd Webber did to musical theatre.*

BY ADAM GOPNIK

American lovers of musical theatre who blame Andrew Lloyd Webber for pretty much everything that went wrong on its stages, starting in the early seventies, will be chagrined to discover that he has written an autobiography that has all the virtues his music always seemed to lack: wit, surprise, contemporaneity, audacity, and an appealingly shrewd sense of the occasion. There is nothing pompous or pallid about his prose, which makes it all the odder that so much of the music that he wrote seems to have no other qualities. Given his reputation as the guy who dragged the Broadway musical from its vitality and idiomatic urgency back to its melodramatic roots in European operetta—while also degrading rock music to a mere rhythm track—is it possible that, as his memoir indicates, his work might be more varied and interesting than we had known? Could we, terrible thought, have been unfair to Andrew Lloyd Webber? The answer turns out, on inspection, to be a complicated and qualified Yes. Certainly, no artist as hugely successful as he has been can have struck a chord without owning a piece of his time.

Lloyd Webber, as his memoir, “Unmasked” (HarperCollins), reveals, was caught in a wrinkle within that time. Though his music may often sound as if it were written by a man locked in the basement of the Paris opera—hearing late-nineteenth-century music, muffled, from a couple of floors down—he turns out to be very much a boy of the Monty Python generation, his ears full of rock and British comedy. Born

in 1948, Lloyd Webber as a child was an Elvis nut who played “Jailhouse Rock” until his parents were numbed by it, and later led a school celebration for the duo Peter and Gordon, recent alumni who had had a pop hit. He knows his instruments, ready to whip out a twelve-string Rickenbacker for the right effect in a recording session.

But he also had, from early on, a Betjemanian love of Englishness: he tells, touchingly, of schoolboy trips to see old churches and abbeys and of a keen love for Pre-Raphaelite art, that wistful-whimsical mode of nineteenth-century British painting. (He later amassed one of the world’s best private collections of the school.) He loved pantomime, a distinctly English holiday entertainment that mixed spectacle, parody, nostalgia, and pastiche. As a child, he operated a toy musical theatre with his brother, in which they put on full-scale shows, Andrew pulling all the strings and arranging all the music. You have a sense that this is still the theatre where he puts on shows; one of those infant musicals was billed as “A Musical of Gigantic Importance,” and several well-known later tunes emerged from them. You get good at this stuff early, or probably not at all.

Rising from the English upper crust—that school he shared with Peter and Gordon was Westminster, a famous London one—he absorbed many of its attitudes, although, the English crust having as many layers as a mille-feuille, one has the sense that he comes from somewhere in the more insecure upper middle, rather than from the very creamy top. He emerged with, among other

things, a passion for P. G. Wodehouse (one of his rare flops was a Wodehouse musical). Indeed, his memoir is written in a sort of Bertie Wooster pastiche, a little disconcertingly given that its material is the very un-Woosterish one of drive and success. At one point, Lloyd Webber even recycles a Wodehouse joke in a way that may puzzle outsiders to the Wodehouse cult, calling people “gruntled.” (It’s from “The Code of the Woosters”: “If not actually disgruntled, he was far from being gruntled.”)

His father, perhaps most significant of all, was a composer of a distinctly English variety—happily obscure, making a living writing old-fashioned organ and choral music for amateur church choirs. He was one of a group of British composers for whom it was still possible to write straight, melodic music that wasn’t pop and somehow make a living. It was his parents who introduced him to Puccini, and then one day his father played “Some Enchanted Evening,” the ballad from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “South Pacific,” saying, “If you ever write a tune half as good as this, I shall be very, very proud of you.” Ah! If only Dad had played “The Lady Is a Tramp” or “Where or When” or another angular and elegant Rodgers and Hart ballad, the history of musical theatre might have been different, and better. (To be fair, whenever Lloyd Webber does write at his best, he writes at Rodgers’s best; the influence flows in and then out, as in the genuinely beautiful “All I Ask of You,” from “The Phantom of the Opera.”)

A kind of admirably defensive attitude got embedded in him from his

ABOVE: LEWIS SCOTT





*In an age when the musical was no longer a hit machine, Lloyd Webber returned the form to its origins in operetta.*



*"Remember the plan: you steal the cash. If we get caught, I'll say thanks to you I'm able to give thousand-dollar bonuses to a handful of my employees."*

•   •

youth: old things could be nice things, and the tastes of awkward schoolboys might be made into entertainment. Those tastes were always what the Brits call "naff"—lame, tacky, uncool. But he knew that naff could be beautiful. The basic formula that lit up the pop cantatas that first made him famous was apparent early on: something old, something new, something borrowed, nothing blue. "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" (1968), which in some ways remains the most vivid thing Lloyd Webber ever wrote, was pushed along by a music master at a prestigious junior school who wanted "something for the whole school to sing." Using Tim Rice's words, which had, instead of sixties piety, a jaunty Python playfulness, he managed to write a school play from Scripture which no one had to take too seriously. Its famous follow-up, "Jesus Christ Superstar" (1970), was a rock album, played on progressive FM before it was a show. Those of us with snobby tastes in Hendrix and the Dead thought it was a terrible rock album, but a rock album is what it was.

So, though his music isn't often grouped with the "prog rock" of the

early seventies—the highly tutored, self-consciously arty music of Yes and early Genesis and Procol Harum and Emerson, Lake & Palmer, and so on—the spirit is very much the same: educated British musicians with classical training, inherited rock rhythm sections, minimal blues feeling, and a taste for the grandiose and bombastic. The famous "Phantom of the Opera" theme, with the organ's quaver accompanied by funereal electric bass and foreboding percussion, is pure prog rock, almost to the point of "Spinal Tap"-style parody. What Lloyd Webber added to the mix was a feeling for pathos and melody—putting Puccini rather than Bach into the prog-rock cauldron. (These connections prove to be fairly direct: the first Jesus in "Jesus Christ Superstar" was the lead singer of Deep Purple, and a subsequent Jesus tried out for Black Sabbath, both groups slightly demented children of prog rock.)

Every biography or memoir set in the world of popular music turns out to be a book about music publishing. You wince as you read the opening chapters, knowing that, with the

fateful inevitability of Greek tragedy, the composer-songwriter-singer is going to sign a deal with a rapacious music publisher as a dewy-eyed youngster and then spend the rest of his life regretting it. Springsteen, the Beatles, most notoriously John Fogerty—the story varies only in the details.

Lloyd Webber reverses the rules. Even before he had written a single hit song, he had spotted in the publisher's contracts something called Grand Rights, meaning the ongoing financial control over theatrical productions. No one in the sixties much cared about these—who was going to mount a theatrical production of a pop cantata?—but Lloyd Webber did, and miraculously managed to hold on to his, or, at least, to eighty per cent of them. (Having to give up twenty per cent "rankles with me to this day," he confides.) Lloyd Webber is ferociously smart about everything to do with money and marketing; every small real-estate transaction he has ever taken part in is recounted in detail and its value offered both in the original sum and, in parenthesis, in the equivalent now—e.g., "£2,000 per year was a lot of money in those days (today approximately £32,000)." Cynics know the price of everything and the value of nothing; a smart popular artist like Lloyd Webber knows the price of everything and the value of everything and can never decide which matters more.

Or, rather, he made the decision, long ago, while still knowing the alternative. For him, calculation and composition go hand in hand—as they did, let it be said, for Irving Berlin and for Richard Rodgers, too. You learn how Lloyd Webber composed "Cats" and "Chess" and the rest; you also learn about the composition of the licensing and merchandising choices. Selecting posters and crafting ads get as much attention as making music. There's even a fascinating digression on how the grooves on the "Evita" LP had to be widened so that when "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" appeared on the radio it would have sufficient volume to compete with the other pop songs.

In truth, Lloyd Webber's genius was always more theatrical than musical—more about putting on a big show than



about writing startling or original music. That's not to say he doesn't care about the music: he talks, fairly, about his pride in the orchestration of the second verse of "Don't Cry for Me Argentina." But the value of the music is determined exclusively by how many people choose to listen to it, and by the "Wow!" factor it presents to a seated audience. The ill-natured regularly insist that Lloyd Webber "stole" music from the classics. Online, one can find fiendishly self-satisfied chat boards detailing the supposed lifts. But if someone can find a pop song ("I Don't Know How to Love Him") in a Mendelssohn violin concerto, more power, and royalties, to him. Lloyd Webber was working his marionettes, with anything that he could find to move them.

At a deeper level, Lloyd Webber's memoir exposes a central fault line in the history of popular music. In the late fifties, not only was the "My Fair Lady" cast album the biggest seller of its time but spinoff jazz albums with musicians playing "My Fair Lady" material were huge sellers, too. Sinatra's great albums of the mid-fifties were heavy with theatre songs. By 1964, all that had altered for good; a successful original-cast album went from the place where hits always happened to a place where they rarely did. When the Beatles and the rest arrived, the line between pop music and theatre music became almost absolute; the circumstance in which a Broadway musical was the natural home of a hit tune began to break up more rapidly than anyone had thought possible, even though the previous connection had been so long-lasting that the Beatles felt obliged to play, as their second song before the American public, "Till There Was You," from Meredith Willson's "The Music Man." An ironic sign of obeisance to a dying order.

When the plates move and shake in a genre of entertainment, you survive by getting either smarter or more spectacular. This was true of the early-seventeenth-century theatre, when, as playgoing moved indoors, away from the giant popular amphitheatres, the special effects got more elaborate and the drama got more daring. It was true of Hollywood after the arrival of tele-

vision, where some went for Cinerama and others went for a more pointedly adult and arty direction. And it was true of musical theatre after rock. Sondheim became the god of smart, Lloyd Webber of spectacular.

You could also, Lloyd Webber sensed instinctively, undertake what rock couldn't do, or did only fitfully: a unified piece of classic storytelling. The Who's "Tommy" is a wonderful rock album, but a very rickety piece of narrative. Lloyd Webber stumbled onto the truth that there was a range of stylized storytelling that lent itself to his music—that if you couldn't tell street tales you could find old fables. All his successful shows have been fables and fairy tales and pageants and pantomimes. Rock having taken the street, the salon was left vacant. With ordinary emotion sung in idiomatic English having been reclaimed by the singer-songwriters, theatrical music could borrow rock style but move backward in form, toward operetta and melodrama. Lloyd Webber and Sondheim both wrote their best work around the subject of "night music"—what it might sound like and what it might mean. Sondheim's night music occupied a single house in wry waltz time; Lloyd Webber's the operatic basement in melodramatic swellings—musicals, still, of Gigantic Importance.

The return to operetta is a surprising but not unnatural development. The history of musical theatre can be seen as a race—like Eliza across the



ice—against the bloodhounds of operetta, with the European formula always lying in wait to recapture the runaway, twirling a mustache and wearing a top hat. The Princess Theatre musicals of Kern, Wodehouse, and Bolton are usually thought to have been the first to make a real break with the European model, offering casual interchange, light-footed melody, and con-

temporary romance in place of the old Viennese pastry.

The odd thing is that, while the "book shows" that sprang from this transformation produced the greatest body of songs since the German Romantics, and more varied than those, the shows that produced those songs were so slight as to be unrevivable, except as nostalgia pieces. The songs have depth and surprise; the shows don't. Of the Rodgers and Hart productions, only one or two stand up, and of the Cole Porter shows hardly more: you have to go right from Rodgers and Hart's "On Your Toes" to Porter's "High Society," with a brief summer-stock stop at "Kiss Me, Kate." (Lloyd Webber, to his credit, produced a revival of "On Your Toes," in London, in the nineteen-eighties, but, he says ruefully, it "cost me my shirt." Though one knows that there was a shirt beneath the shirt, and one beneath that.)

Better shows with lesser music have become more familiar than the shows with the very best stuff, which is mostly hived off to jazz and cabaret. The Rodgers and Hammerstein shows, which are unified and theatrical, are still in constant circulation, even though they don't contain Rodgers's best work. The Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals have been revived so successfully in the past two decades, in impeccably posh corners like the National Theatre in London and Lincoln Center Theatre here, that it's hard to recall that not so long ago they were considered very déclassé—taken for granted by an earlier generation to have been part of the suburban middlebrow descent of Broadway theatre in the nineteen-fifties, especially when it came to the quality of the music. Alec Wilder, in "American Popular Song: The Great Innovators," still the best book on the topic, could hardly find six Rodgers and Hammerstein songs that he thought were equal to Rodgers's work with Hart, calling "Some Enchanted Evening," which so enchanted the Lloyd Webbers, "pale and pompous and bland." Yet the Rodgers and Hammerstein shows survive because they keep intact the crucial discovery of the American form, the thing that really separated it from the opera tradition and its

dependencies: extraordinary emotion sung by ordinary people, rather than extraordinary emotion sung by extraordinary people.

Lloyd Webber's musicals are all operetta in that simple sense. They are filled with extraordinary people—whether *Evita* or *Jesus*—singing big stuff; the excitement gained by the spectacle is paid for by the loss of soul, pious aspiration replacing spice and street savvy. (Today, one listens to a now forgotten show like *Phil Silvers and Johnny Mercer's 1951 "Top Banana"* with astonishment at its energy and its urban moxie.) A good book holds up even bathetic music—a lesson not lost on Lloyd Webber. The closest thing he has achieved to the older style of musical is "*Cats*," from 1981, a show that had street wisdoms within its Eliotian measures. (The often maligned "*Cats*" is doubtless in part a victim of an ugly kind of reverse snobbery: had it appeared for a month at the National Theatre, instead of for all our lifetimes in the West End and on Broadway, it would have had a choicer reputation.)

Theatricality is the key to Lloyd Webber's success, and theatre is conflict. Not surprisingly, he tells many fine theatre stories, most of them, as is the way in the history of the musical, tales of rage, resentment, and growing mutual mistrust, all in the cause of making two and a half hours of middle-brow entertainment. The stories are good, and sometimes violent. He tells of the time that the actor Michael Crawford and the producer Cameron Mackintosh got out of a London car and started a fistfight on the street because Crawford wanted to use a recording of one of his "*Phantom*" songs in performance. We learn that Lloyd Webber's longtime partner Tim Rice once became so enraged that he threatened a lawsuit to have his words removed from "*Memory*"—to be sure, something any honest man would want to do. (Rice and Lloyd Webber have only recently seemed to reconcile.) Given the scale of Lloyd Webber's successes, one is startled by the vitriol that accompanies his productions. He even reproduces catty letters that he wrote to Patti LuPone during the run of

"*Evita*," despairing of her ability to sing the words clearly enough for them to be understood by the audience. (She never really did, and it never really mattered.)

"Understand some of my lyrics still in show despite your assurances to the contrary," Rice telexed to his partner, in good Wodehousian telegraphic form. "Demand removal by tonight or legal action follows." How, one wonders, could people have nearly come to blows, with lawsuits and friendships ripped apart, over "*Cats*"? If the rule in the movie industry is that nobody knows anything, the rule in musical theatre is more fiendish: everybody does know something, but nobody knows what bit of what's known will count, and everybody hates the next person for thinking he or she does. That's one theory for why the history of the musical is a history of men and women shouting at one another. The incomparable composer and lyricist Frank Loesser once ordered a director to tell an actor not to sing a song the wrong way, and, after the director obligingly did so, Loesser yelled at him anyway: "You didn't hit him, you son of a bitch!" The producer Cy Feuer tells of how, during a Philadelphia tryout of a harmless musical called "*Little Me*," the wonderful lyricist Carolyn Leigh actually went outside and asked a police officer to arrest him for cutting one of her songs.

But my own theory for why musical comedies make people miserable, richly borne out by Lloyd Webber's memoir, is that there is no natural author of a musical—that is, no one who assumes authority, more or less inevitably, owing to the nature of the form. The director, by contrast, is the natural author of a movie. He coaxes out the performances, allows the improvis, and makes the cuts. A choreographer, similarly, is the natural author of the dance. Most of the time, the natural author is the actual author, and the exceptions leave us grumbling. Authors write books, even if editors mightily assist.

But a musical has no natural author. It has five or six or seven. The composer is the actual author of the most powerful emotional beats in the piece—we remember Richard Rodgers's music in "*Carousel*" far better than any other

element—but composers tend to be inarticulate and are often outtalked. The book writer, as he is archaically still called—elsewhere, simply, the playwright—is the most important maker; but though he provides the structure in which the songs may take place, no one recalls the structure, only the songs. The director is often powerful to the point of omnipotence, but no one except special groups of insiders will ever think of the show as his. The lyricist, meanwhile, has a reasonable claim to being the true author of the show—the music's emotional force takes on specific meaning only through the words it accompanies—but he often ends up the most invisible of all. Meanwhile, the choreographer believes himself to be the natural author of all the things the director is doing badly, but is also sure that the director will get the credit even if the choreographer fixes them. Add to this the truth that songs that delighted salons of backers bore audiences silly, and that the things that worked perfectly in rehearsal die a dog's death onstage, and you have a natural abyss of authority. You need only bring in the panic of pure ignorance to produce an atmosphere like that of a third-world country after the President has left the palace and the mobs are surging in the streets.

So it shouldn't be surprising to discover that, even after Lloyd Webber had become a theatrical Godzilla, he was still entangled in the whims and the will of others. The stage design of "*Phantom of the Opera*" proposed by Trevor Nunn, Lloyd Webber thinks, would have damaged the show, and he's probably right, but to fight off Nunn in favor of Hal Prince was brutal, friendship-ending work, wounding both would-be directors at once. It was quite a typical tangle: "I feared that both Trevor and Cameron would think it was the reviews"—for "*Les Mis*," at that point, amazingly, was considered a failure—"that were the reason for my insisting that the director must be Hal. Cameron seemed curiously disturbed when I stood my ground. Years later, I discovered the reason. Although I still presumed that Hal was to be our director, in fact he had been stood down. I also learned that Hal blamed me for this and was appalled." He concludes,



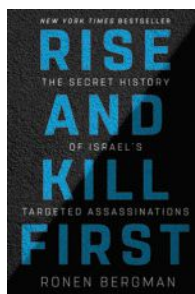
"It's best left at that," unintentionally echoing the famous words of the Spinal Tap guitarist about one of the group's dying drummers. Lloyd Webber's stories, far from being tales of aims accomplished, remain tales of aims gone wrong and of mountains not quite climbed. Even the most powerful auteur of musicals can never quite become their author.

"Phantom of the Opera" is probably the closest thing we will have to a complete expression of Lloyd Webber's vision, and here it is on Broadway, still playing thirty years on, likely, as he says himself, the single most successful piece of theatrical entertainment ever engineered. As a recent visit confirms, it remains today, for the audience of tourists and kids who flock to it, as impressive as it was when it debuted. The show manages to be both absolutely terrible and sort of great. The action makes no sense, it takes forever for the story to get going, the characters are made of cardboard, and the music is made of bits and pieces. But theatre is brutally binary; it either works or it doesn't, and no one with a fair mind and a taste for the theatrical can deny that this show works.

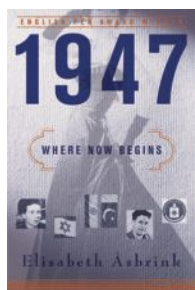
It is pure, unadulterated operetta: the entire first twenty minutes of the show are given over to a bit of self-amused nineteenth-century pastiche, and then twenty minutes later we get an extended Mozart parody that must be lost on nine-tenths of the audience. But its theatricality, both of the showy, expensive kind (rising and falling chandeliers, mysterious mirrors and underground lagoons) and of the more potent, elemental kind (obsessive love and beautiful sopranos and virtuous aristocrats), remains intact.

Spectacular is, in the end, a species of smart. Popular artists find solutions to problems presented by the circumstances of their time which no one else was aware of until the artist solved them. Lloyd Webber solved the problem of how to make a credible spectacle from recycled material. Using fresher material to make something spectacular on its own terms remains the job that needs doing. Every good art form needs a phantom or two in the basement to haunt it. They just shouldn't be allowed the run of the house. ♦

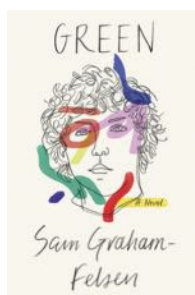
## BRIEFLY NOTED



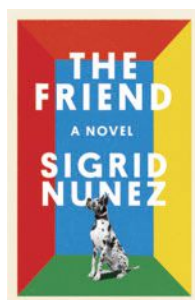
**Rise and Kill First**, by Ronen Bergman (Random House). This remarkable account of Israel's targeted-killing programs is the product of nearly eight years of research into what is arguably the most secretive and impenetrable intelligence community in the world. Bergman, an investigative reporter and military analyst, interviewed hundreds of insiders, including assassins, and obtained thousands of classified documents. The genesis of what he calls "the most robust, streamlined assassination machine in history" spans more than a century, beginning in Ottoman Palestine, where Eastern European Zionist guerrillas covertly arranged for the slaying of a Bedouin policeman. Questions of ethics, legality, and geopolitics pervade the work. As Bergman writes, "It is very hard to predict how history will proceed after someone is shot in the head."



**1947**, by Elisabeth Åsbrink, translated from the Swedish by Fiona Graham (Other Press). "I try to assemble the year 1947 into a splintered whole," Åsbrink writes in this gripping history, formed as a patchwork of significant events. In Paris, the final names are added to the treaties ending the war; in New York, Billie Holiday plays Carnegie Hall; in Cairo, the Arab League convenes on the issue of Palestine; on a Scottish island, George Orwell completes "1984." Åsbrink also tells the story of her father, a Hungarian Jew who spent the year in a Zionist camp for orphans in Germany. Her careful juxtaposition of disparate events highlights an underlying interconnectedness and suggests a new way of thinking about the postwar era.



**Green**, by Sam Graham-Felsen (Random House). This debut novel, set in 1992, follows its protagonist, David, through sixth grade, at Boston's Martin Luther King, Jr., Middle School. David is white and middle class; his best friend, Marlon, is a bookish black kid who lives in public housing. The boys spend much of the year seeking admission to Boston Latin—their ticket, teachers promise, to a top college. But hard work isn't enough to overcome structural inequalities. As one character—a black Harvard graduate—tells them, "Don't look at me and start believing 'anybody can make it.' That's a doggone lie." Through the eyes of its white narrator, the book's black characters sometimes feel less than fully realized, but *Green's* tale is funny and affecting.



**The Friend**, by Sigrid Nunez (Riverhead). The narrator of this novel is a writer who has lost her best friend, a philanthropic teacher and writer, to suicide. In diaristic chapters addressed to him, she recalls his advice to, and affairs with, students; draws insights into the humiliations of the creative life from the history of art, literature, and music; and describes her own teaching with bemused rage ("Student B is concerned that so much of the assigned reading includes books that failed to make money"). She inherits the friend's Great Dane, but canine companionship does little to curb her increasingly morbid fixation on death and loss. In crystalline prose, Nunez creates an impressively controlled portrait of the "exhaustion of mourning."

# SPLIT PERSONALITY

*The Metropolitan Opera lurches between the sublime and the ridiculous.*

BY ALEX ROSS

On the evidence of two productions that played at the Metropolitan Opera in mid-February, an opera lover from another planet might have concluded that two different companies were sharing the same space. The first offered an austere hypnotic staging of “Parsifal,” in which singers not only did justice to Wagner’s monumental, cryptic score but brought it to shuddering life. The second unloaded a monstrously tacky version of Rossini’s “Semiramide,” one whose sets and costumes seemed to have been raided from a museum of theatrical kitsch, not excluding souvenirs of Liberace-era Las Vegas. Met No. 1 was cohesive and purposeful; Met No. 2 felt chaotic and hapless.

Such a juxtaposition is typical of the modern-day Met, which keeps lurching between a cumbersome past and glimpses of a more adventurous future. The “Parsifal,” a François Girard production that was first seen in 2013, is one of the finest achievements of Peter Gelb’s regime, fulfilling his goal of bringing a new level of theatrical sophistication to the house. But other efforts in that direction have fallen short, and have highlighted a stifling streak of conservatism in the Met audience. The fate of “Tosca” is a case in point. In 2009, Gelb retired Franco Zeffirelli’s lavishly appointed staging in favor of a stripped-down, would-be provocative version by Luc Bondy. Boos resounded on opening night, and donors made their displeasure known. Last New Year’s Eve, another “Tosca,” by David McVicar, went on the boards—this one traditional in style, though the sets were

noirishly askew. Gelb told the *Times*, “I have learned my lesson from the Bondy production. When it comes to a classic piece of repertoire, beauty counts—and that’s what the audience wants.”

During McVicar’s “Tosca,” applause greeted each of the opera’s familiar Roman settings as it was unveiled. This was sad to hear. The Bondy “Tosca” may

sage is being sent when such a scenario becomes a vehicle for opulent nostalgia. Fortunately, operagoers have shown more open-mindedness in other instances. Girard’s “Parsifal,” brooding and blood-soaked, is hardly a picture-postcard affair, yet it has transfixed large crowds. Robert Carsen’s version of “Der Rosenkavalier,” both grand and sordid in its vision of fin-de-siècle society, proved popular last season. The lesson to be learned from these productions is that audiences will venture far afield when they are decisively led.

“Semiramide” felt aimless not least because no one was really at the helm. The staging dates back to 1990, and had not been seen since 1993. John

Copley, who directed the original, returned to oversee the revival, but was fired after making what the Met described as an inappropriate comment to a member of the chorus. Roy Rallo valiantly took over. Even if the ghost of Meyerhold had assumed command, though, there would have been no stopping the tawdriness. Rossini’s tale of the quasi-mythic Assyrian queen Semiramis is buried in feathered headgear, tasselled parasols, bejewelled scabbards, beauty-pageant crowns and sashes, and swaths of scarlet and purple and teal. The score is heavily cut. It’s almost hilariously atrocious—but the laughter dies in one’s throat, because the production demeans Rossini. All the work that has been done to rehabilitate bel-canto opera in recent decades—an effort guided by the revered scholar Philip Gossett, who died last June—is seemingly



*Evelyn Herltzius, a ferociously expressive performer, in “Parsifal.”*

have flopped, but its intent was laudable. The Met cannot sustain itself by giving a superficially handsome veneer to works that should challenge us as much as they comfort us. The plot of “Tosca” involves torture, attempted rape, and murder. Those who are demanding a return to traditional stagings should ask themselves what kind of social mes-

wiped away in a matter of minutes.

Angela Meade is one of very few contemporary sopranos who have the technique and the stamina to bring off the role of Semiramide, a proud and ruthless ruler who makes the tragic discovery that her fiancé is her own son. Meade first sang the part at the Caramoor Festival, in 2009, wowing cognoscenti with



her immaculate coloratura and gleaming high notes. Since then, she has had several successes at the Met, notably as Norma. At the opening night of “Semiramide,” she was ill at ease in her early scenes: her showpiece aria, “Bel raggio lusinghier,” suffered from uneven phrasing, intrusive vibrato, and a constricted high E. After that, she sang with greater assurance and bite. No stand-alone diva, she is often at her best when interacting with colleagues: sometimes she soars above them, and sometimes she lets her voice melt into another’s, as in her final, maternal duet with the gifted young mezzo Elizabeth DeShong.

Javier Camarena portrayed the Indian prince Idreno. No Rossini tenor today has a more liquid legato or a more effortless reach to high C and above. Camarena may not match the stylistic intelligence of Lawrence Brownlee, who sang Idreno at Caramoor, but the pleasure this tenor takes in his voice is infectious, stirring memories of Pavarotti. As Arsace, Semiramide’s love object turned son, DeShong made her highest-profile Met appearance to date, following in the steps of the great Marilyn Horne. DeShong sang with preternatural loveliness of tone and nimbleness of execution, though not with Horne-like panache. The fast-rising bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green was stylish and stentorian as the high priest Oroe. The one odd piece of casting was of the physically imposing Russian bass Ildar Abdrazakov as the villainous Assur: he skated over coloratura passages and tended to fade out at the lower end of his voice. He did, however, look convincing in breastplate.

Two different Met orchestras showed up during this Rossini-Wagner stretch. In “Semiramide,” under the direction of Maurizio Benini, the ensemble was surprisingly sketchy in places, missing the crisp snap that Rossini requires. But in “Parsifal,” under Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the musicians made a uniformly glorious sound. Nézet-Séguin, who will become the Met’s music director next fall, is not the ideal conductor for this opera; he favors a brisk, clear-cut approach, and is not inclined toward Wagnerian mystery. At the matinée on February 17th, the Prelude to Act III lacked an eerie chill, and the dissonant climax of Titirel’s funeral music failed to induce

shivers of awe. Still, I preferred Nézet-Séguin’s vitality to the grandiose, studied manner of Daniele Gatti, who led “Parsifal” in 2013. The performance humanized Girard’s postapocalyptic tableaux. It bodes well for the Nézet-Séguin era.

Klaus Florian Vogt sang the title role, his pure-toned, pale-bright tenor a welcome contrast to the pitched shouting one too often hears in Wagner. He captured the callow boy Parsifal of Act I, but was less suited for the maturing hero of Acts II and III. Peter Mattei and René Pape returned as Amfortas and Gurnemanz, the wounded king and the wise chronicler. Mattei’s soliloquies of agony were even more gorgeously piercing than they were in 2013. Pape, long an indispensable Wagnerian at the Met, has experienced some falling off in power, but his Gurnemanz was more vivid than before, exhibiting a pained, almost desperate edge.

In the end, though, this “Parsifal” belonged to the ferociously expressive German soprano Evelyn Herlitzius, making a belated Met début as Kundry. Herlitzius trained as a dancer before turning to singing, and it shows in the extraordinary flexibility and focus of her physical movement. She conveyed with uncommon vividness the various personas inhabited by Wagner’s undying heroine: the sleepless wanderer, the motherly companion, the agonized seductress, the remorseful seeker who once laughed at Christ. Spastic, puppetlike gestures evoked her subservience to the sorcerer Klingsor. Herlitzius’s voice is not conventionally beautiful, its steeliness verging on harshness, but it delivers the musical goods. In her mighty cry of “*Lachte*”—“I laughed”—she landed the vertiginous descent from high B to low C-sharp with athletic precision. In the final act, where she had only one phrase to sing (“To serve”), her portrait of spiritual devotion remained at the center of the drama. Girard conceives of Kundry not simply as Parsifal’s penitent servant but as the celebrant of the Grail. Too often, Kundry’s death, during the final tableau, seems incidental and unmotivated. Herlitzius, crawling toward Amfortas and then collapsing, made it the necessary, wrenching resolution. It felt as though a problematic masterpiece had been healed of its wounds. One can ask no more of a night at the opera. ♦



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THE  
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## RETURN OF THE NATIVE

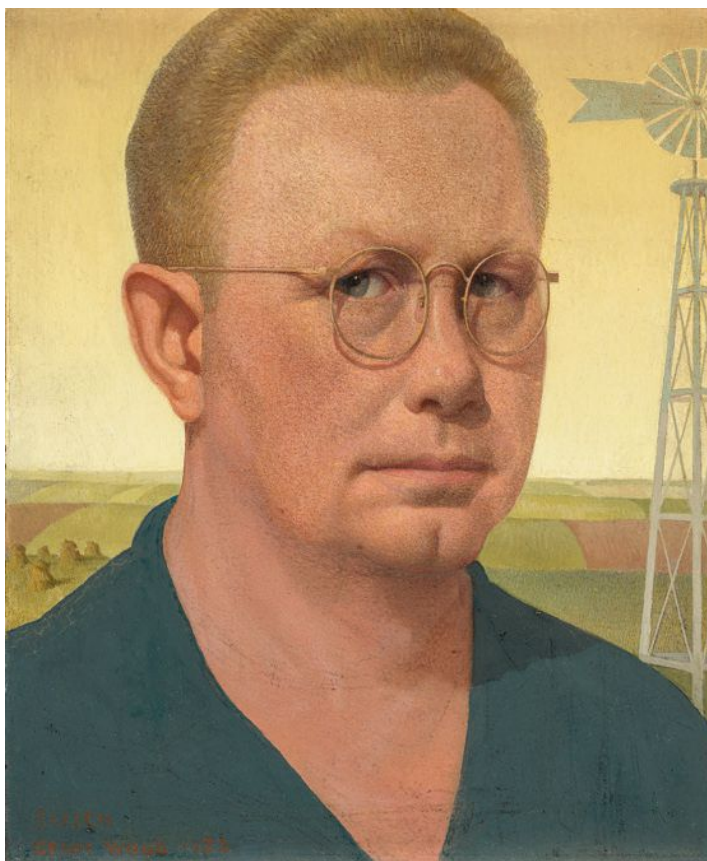
*A Grant Wood retrospective at the Whitney.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Had Grant Wood not made the painting “American Gothic” (1930), there would not be a Grant Wood retrospective now at the Whitney Museum. This would be a pity, because the show fascinates as a plunge into certain deliriums of the United States in the nineteen-thirties, notably a culture war between cosmopolitan and nativist sensibilities. But any notion that the Iowan—who died in 1942, of pancreatic cancer, on the day before his fifty-first birthday—is an underrated artist fizzles. “American Gothic” is, by a very wide margin, his most effective picture—though not his best, for which I nominate “Dinner for Threshers” (1934), a long, low, cutaway view of a farmhouse at harvesttime that brought to disciplined perfection Wood’s strong suit, imaginative design. He was a strange man who made occasionally impressive, predominantly weird, sometimes god-awful art in thrall to a programmatic sense of mission: to exalt rural America in a manner adapted from Flemish Old Masters. “American Gothic”—starchy couple, triune pitchfork, churchy house, bubbly trees—succeeded, deserving the inevitable term “iconic” for its punch and tickling ambiguity. (It’s still hard to say what, exactly, is being iconized.) The work made Wood, at the onset of his maturity as an artist, a national celebrity, and the attendant pressures pretty well wrecked him. I came away from the show with a sense of waste and sadness.

Wood was born on a farm, in 1891. His forbiddingly taciturn Quaker fa-

ther—“more a god than a father to me,” he later wrote—died when Wood was ten. His mother, with whom he would live until her death, in 1935, moved him and his three siblings to Cedar Rapids. The closest to him was his younger sister Nan, who posed as the prim wife or (as she later insisted) daughter of the lugubrious male in “American Gothic.”



*Wood in a self-portrait he completed in 1941, the year before his death.*

Wood was precocious in a wide range of crafts—silversmithing, ceramics, interior decoration, and, in one prodigious instance, stained-glass design—and an inveterate participant in local art and theatre clubs and projects.

Between 1922 and 1928, he had three sojourns in Paris, where he studied art and developed a generic Impressionist painting style oddly inflected by crisply

contoured details that suggest a tug toward mosaic flatness. The early craft works in the show convey a buoyant creative personality that his paintings overly strained with mixed ambitions—to be decorative, which he was good at, and narrative, which he wasn’t. The pieces include some practically Dadaist still-life sculptures, made of machine parts, and a chandelier, designed for a Cedar Rapids hotel, with eye-fooling replicas of corncocks. (“Corny” is a multipurpose adjective for Iowa, the Saudi Arabia of exported corn.) Reproduced photographically in the show at half scale, the vast stained-glass window he made for the Veterans Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids quite ravishes, with an angelic figure of Peace standing above

ranked American soldiers from six wars. It was while overseeing its fabrication, in Munich, in 1928, that Wood latched on to a five-centuries-old mentor, Hans Memling, the greatest portrait painter of the Northern Renaissance. Memling’s precise delineation, incorporation of landscape backgrounds, piquant detail, and glowing color in oil glazes became aspects of Wood’s style. In short order, this and his agrarian subject matter combined with a national mood of restive nostalgia to make Wood a paladin—routinely yoked with the Missourian Thomas Hart Benton and the Kansan John Steuart Curry—of anti-modernist regionalism.

Why Wood now? One political factor and one social factor seem to be in play in the Whitney’s first retrospective of the artist since 1983 (at that time, the chief impetus was a vogue, begun in the seventies, for revisionist art history). The politics may be deemed prescient, since the show was planned before the election of Donald Trump, but it feels right on time. I have in mind the worries of urban liberals about the insurgent conservative truculence in what is often dismissed—with a disdain duly noted by citizens of



the respective states—as flyover country. Parallels between reactionary trends now and those of the thirties are inexact, of course, and can be untrue to the facts of both eras, at least in America. In the thirties and forties, in ways that became art-world conventional wisdom, some critics equated regionalism with the blood-and-soil mystique of Nazism and/or socialist realism. But Wood, Benton, and Curry were sturdy Roosevelt liberals. (Wood headed Iowa offices of the New Deal programs that supported artists during the Depression.) Some sophisticates, in New York and Hollywood smart sets, took these artists' works in stride as populist chic. Collectors of Wood included Cole Porter, Alexander Woollcott, Edward G. Robinson, and King Vidor. Then, as perhaps now, there was a recuperative urge among metropolitans to make nice with the disgruntled heartland—an uphill process, as witness a recent protest movement against a terrific Benton mural, at Indiana University, that features Ku Klux Klan figures, never mind that Benton meant to denigrate them.

The social factor entails identity politics. Wood was homosexual, a fact long unpublished and, even now, commonly reported with qualifiers: “repressed,” “closeted,” “latent.” There’s no record of his acting on his orientation, but, for the last six years of his life, he lived with his personal secretary. And no special sleuthing is needed to winkle out his desires from his enraptured depictions of hunky men versus his stony ones of women, and the recurrent suggestion of male anatomy in his bizarre Iowa landscapes—spatially impossible topographies, compounding descriptive and decorative techniques without the slightest feel for nature, which can appear impatient for the arrival of a Warner Bros. cartoon character or two. (If anything about the putatively backward-looking Wood was closeted, it was Surrealism; there are whiffs in his work of the fantastic landscapes of the next artist to be as famous in America as he had been: Salvador Dalí.) A recent biography of the artist by R. Tripp Evans takes gaydar to such feverish extremes that an essay by Richard Meyer in the show’s catalogue takes pains to tone it down a little. (“Sometimes an ear of corn is just an ear of corn,” Meyer remarks.) Wood

was certainly conflicted, and he had good reason to fear damage to his very public career as a lecturer and oft-quoted savant. He was briefly, disastrously married to a flamboyant former opera singer, Sara Sherman Maxon, several years his senior, who alienated his circle of friends in Cedar Rapids. Lester Longman, a modernist-minded colleague in the University of Iowa art department, where Wood had taught since 1935, tried mightily to have him fired, in part on explicit moral grounds. But the university ignored the charge and retained Wood. There’s a tendency in our time of retroactive frankness to imagine that grownups of the past didn’t know things about one another when, in fact, they merely kept mum.

I recommend spending minutes with a Memling-esque self-portrait that Wood began in 1932 and completed in 1941. It seems to me tragicomic—an effort to project masculine resolve by a hypersensitive man who, in 1941, was drinking heavily, tormented by his nemesis Longman, and in failing health. He had to sense the underpinnings of his popularity crumbling as the war approached that would tie America’s fate to that of Europe once again and eclipse rustic romance with the thrum of heavy industry. A memorial show after his death, at the Art Institute of Chicago, was a flop. The regionalists lost standing to less boosterish modern painters of American subjects, such as Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, Reginald Marsh, and Charles Sheeler. (Meanwhile, in New York, the gay painters Paul Cadmus and Jared French employed styles akin to that of Wood to kick their closet doors at least halfway open.) In the self-portrait, a windmill—a leitmotif in most of Wood’s landscapes—looms behind him against a yellow sky. There’s a faintly seductive sensuality in his pink fleshiness, emphasized by the plunging neckline of the shirt that he wears. His face, despite its determinedly set eyes and mouth, has a babyish look that people often remarked on. As with all his works that reward more than a glance, including “American Gothic,” a deeply buried, wild humor seems astir yet, at the same time, baffled at the point of its contact with the world. The longer I look at the picture, the more I feel that its subject is about to burst into tears. ♦



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ON TELEVISION

# LOVE, ACTUALLY

*The feminine craftiness of "Jane the Virgin."*

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



A few weeks ago, the CW aired a perfect episode of “Jane the Virgin,” directed by its star Gina Rodriguez. It had five plots, ranging from poignant to zany. Each scene was tinted in pastels, like a plate of macarons. There were two gorgeous dresses and three hot consummations, plus a cliffhanger, several heart-to-hearts, and Brooke Shields getting attacked by a wolf on live TV. As usual, the world took all this perfection for granted.

“Jane the Virgin,” which debuted in 2014, is an extremely loose adaptation of a Venezuelan telenovela in which a poor teen-ager has the ultimate “whoops” pregnancy: she’s accidentally impregnated via artificial insemination, then falls for the wealthy bio dad. For the American version, the creator, Jennie Snyder Urman,

added a fabulous framing device—a Latin-lover narrator who punctuates his remarks with the refrain “Just like a telenovela, right?” An excitable fanboy who tosses out Twitter hashtags like confetti, the narrator (voiced by the very funny Anthony Mendez) works as a bridge to the globally popular genre, but he also helps link it to other women’s “stories”: the soap, the rom-com, the romance novel, and, more recently, reality television. These are the genres that get dismissed as fluff, which is how our culture regards art that makes women’s lives look like fun. They’re “guilty pleasures,” not unlike sex itself. Women use this language, too—even Rodriguez, in interviews, has compared her show to red-velvet cupcakes and Justin Bieber.

In fact, “Jane the Virgin” is more like

a joyful manifesto against that very put-down, a bright-pink filibuster exposing the layers in what the world regards as shallow. When the American version begins, Jane is twenty-three, living in Miami, and still a virgin, torn between her devout Catholic grandmother and her wild-thing mom, who had her at sixteen. Her soul mate, Rafael, is a roguish hotel heir—and the show gives him meaningful competition, in the form of a nice-guy detective, Michael, whom Jane eventually marries. But, in four seasons, the show has expanded far beyond that formative love triangle. Jane has been a single mom, a happily married woman, and a devastated widow. The virgin part disappeared in Season 3, the word scratched out every week in the titles.

Beyond these plot tweaks, however, the show made a bolder move, cross-hatching the narrative with self-referential inventions, frame inside frame inside frame. Jane, her *abuela* Alba, and her mother, Xiomara, relax by watching telenovelas, just as the Gilmore girls once watched screwball comedies. Jane’s ambition is to write romance novels—and, when she goes to grad school, she spars with a romance-hating feminist professor, played by the show’s frequent director, Melanie Mayron (Melissa Steadman, on “Thirtysomething”). Jane’s long-lost father, Rogelio De La Vega (Jaime Camil), is the hilariously vain star of the telenovela “The Passions of Santos” (and, for a while, of a reality show called “De La Vega-Factor Factor,” along with a matchmaker named Darci Factor). This season, the U.S. version of “The Passions of Santos” has been picked up—on the condition that it also feature Rogelio’s latest nemesis, America’s sweetheart River Fields (Shields, naturally), star of “The Green Lagoon.”

The meta television show is hardly a new invention. And, in one sense, “Jane” is simply the latest in a tradition of ambitious shows that both emulate and deconstruct established TV genres, from “Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman” (daytime soaps) to “BoJack Horseman” (nineties sitcoms). But one of the striking things about “Jane the Virgin” is that it is never truly ironic, let alone condescending to its source material. It is a deeply heartfelt production, sweet without being saccharine, as well as sophisticated about and truly interested in all



the varieties of love, from familial to carnal. It's a smart show that parents and teen-agers can watch together—which, in a better world, might be a recommendation to a larger audience. Although it employs all the tools of high melodrama—evil twins, gaslighting—it doesn't have a camp sensibility. Instead, it ballasts the most outrageous twists with realistic emotional responses. How would you feel if your twin stole your identity and drugged you into paralysis, thus intensifying your postpartum depression? This is one show that will take your trauma seriously.

The performances are equally layered, particularly a breakout one by Yael Grobglas, as both Petra, Rafael's ex-wife, and Anezka, the aforementioned evil twin. A Czech street hustler turned glam hotelier, Grobglas's Petra glides from Carole Lombard daffiness to Grace Kelly hauteur, noir to slapstick to heartbreak, often within a scene. For two seasons, I kept forgetting that the twins were played by one person, let alone one person acting like one character pretending to be the other character pretending to be the first character.

Without a marquee director in the credits, "Jane" rarely comes up in conversations about visually provocative television, but it should: it has an unusual optical density, somehow managing to be simultaneously meditative and manic. Spanish speakers, like Alba, get subtitles. But other captions bubble across the screen, to underscore plot points or to add visual punch lines: the "one hour later" that stripes a set of double doors cracks in half when a character walks through them. Rogelio's overeager tweeting provides entire subplots. When lovers text, words appear and disappear as they edit, letting us enter their thoughts.

And then there's the show's frequent backdrop, the Marbella hotel, a dreamy castle full of turquoise sofas. Color is a huge part of the show's appeal: hearts throb pink when people are in love; Rogelio's lavender accessories are flags for his moods. Lacking the big bucks of pay cable, "Jane" turns the CW's limitations into advantages, making elegant use of the screen, often through a kind of flirtatious denial. When Jane gazes to her right during a dinner at the Marbella, her face blocks our view of the se-

ductive text that Rafael has sent her. When the two finally make love, we get mere flashes of flesh in the shower: her arm, his back, her hip. "Come on, I can't show you everything," the narrator tells us. "We're not on HBO."

Despite that meta wisecrack, that sex scene is genuinely steamy, and not just because it's set in a shower: it's the consummation of an attraction that has lasted four seasons. Telenovelas have a long tradition as transmitters of social messages; in Mexico, the government used hit shows as vehicles to advocate for family planning. Our own government would surely deplore the messages "Jane" sends: like the Netflix series "One Day at a Time," it puts Latino immigrants, including undocumented workers, at the center of the story. It also goes deep on women's health, with plots that include Jane's struggle to breast-feed and a crisp, unapologetic story about abortion. Once in a while, there's a corny note of edutainment—a bisexual-boyfriend plot had this vibe—but it's a rarity.

Still, there's a tricky tension in the show between its family-time warmth and its fascination with sex itself, a subject that it has examined seriously, and increasingly graphically, in a way that many theoretically adult shows do not. "Jane" is respectful to the devout Alba (wonderfully portrayed by Ivonne Coll), who crumpled a flower and told Jane that that was her virtue, if she gave it away. But it's also an advocate for moving past shame. In that same perfect episode, the one in which Jane and Rafael finally get it on, there's a story in which Alba confesses the real reason that she ended things with her boyfriend, once he proposed: she's frightened of sex, having not had it for thirty years. "You get used to things—or not having things," she tells her granddaughter, in a moving, simple sequence. Jane argues that her *abuela* isn't, as she sees herself, "broken"—but her solution is not to tell Alba to jump in bed with a man but to take her shopping for a vibrator and some lubricant. In that montage of three sexual awakenings, the septuagenarian gets one of them. Refreshingly, the moment is not played for laughs: in Jane's world, sex, like love, is a bright color that everyone deserves to see. ♦

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## HELLZAPOPPIN'

*"Jerry Springer: The Opera" and "Black Light" take on turbulent times.*

BY HILTON ALS

*"Jerry Springer: The Opera" is a meta version of the TV show: banal and titillating.*

I'm not sure if playwrights, novelists, and poets are critical of slogans, catchphrases, and the like because they're reductive or because they resonate for a general audience in ways that long-form writing does not. It must be galling for a great author from the nineteen-sixties or seventies, say, to realize that slogans from the time, such as "Black Is Beautiful" and "Sisterhood Is Powerful," have outlasted—at least in terms of popularity—all those pages filled with tales of human ambivalence and emotion, injury and reflection.

While the television personality Jerry Springer—it's a stretch to call him a host; how do you host a brawl?—uses words on his twenty-six-year-old tabloid talk show, the language can be hard to follow, because "The Jerry Springer Show" is all about disruption. That is, until the end,

when the seventy-four-year-old Springer calls a ceasefire for the cheating husbands, two-timing wives, and emotionally mangled children and offers what he terms his "Final Thought." That thought, uttered in a bland, avuncular voice that bears traces, still, of a Queens accent—Springer, the child of German Jewish immigrants, grew up in Kew Gardens—is delivered after a commercial break, when, facing the camera in medium shot, he makes a plea for tolerance. "Deep down, we are all alike. Some of us just dress better, or had a better education, or better luck in the gene pool of parents. I'll say it again: deep down, we are all the same," he has said, or, a trifle less elaborately, "Take care of yourself, and each other." This combination of homilies and therapy-speak reads as an update of Red Skelton's "Good night and may God bless" sign-off on his TV

show: a straight shot of Christian ethos, mindfulness, and love.

But Springer's shock TV is mostly framed by class: he provides a forum for people—primarily Christian, sub-working-class people, struggling with drugs or other shit that gets them high, like misogyny and racism—who feel voiceless elsewhere. Stigmatized by a lack of education and opportunity, these warring personalities are temporarily relieved of the tedium of poverty by acting out its brutalities for Springer's lens. His enormous popularity validates the marginal while appealing to everyone's lowest common denominator, including a disdain for the poor. By 1998, seven years after it debuted, "The Jerry Springer Show" was drawing almost ten million viewers a day. Even Oprah couldn't ignore the phenomenon, and for a time her show featured its own sexual secrets and marital dramas. Eventually, she admitted that that had been a mistake. How many times can a TV host dig for another I-am-a-gay-truck-driving-stuffed-animal-fetishist-and-I-have-to-tell-my-wife-and-my-three-grown-children-that-I'm-leaving-them-for-my-boyfriend's-grandmother narrative, to keep up the ratings?

Is "Jerry Springer: The Opera" (a New Group production, directed by John Rando, at the Pershing Square Signature Center) a mistake as well? In many ways, the show is a meta version of Springer's TV program: banal and titillating. This piece, which premiered in London in 2003, is about class, too, but in a different way. Its British creators, Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee—Thomas wrote the music and lyrics and collaborated with Lee on the book—have put out an opera, a genre that one usually associates with the moneyed classes. But by making an opera about television—a source of entertainment for the Everyman—they are, perforce, creating a marriage of high and low. Unlike some other recent works in which the juxtaposition of Old World culture and New World product succeeds—including Mark-Anthony Turnage's surprising and moving 2011 opera, "Anna Nicole"—"Jerry Springer: The Opera" doesn't bristle with strangeness and energy. Thomas and Lee have made an unhealthy distraction out of an unhealthy distortion, in which people are not people but types. (A star who emerges from the spectacle is the outstanding



Tiffany Mann, as Shawntel, a black woman fighting with her racist white husband over her plans to become a pole dancer.)

The show begins with the actors seated in the audience. Warm-Up Man (Will Swenson) is jazzed; his job is to get the crowd riled up before Springer (Terrence Mann, who is fantastic in the role) comes out, bespectacled and unsmiling, a mirror for the problems of the world, or, at least, this world. But, before long, we leave this world: when one of the unhinged guests turns the proceedings more than just verbally violent, Springer enters Purgatory. Here, alongside former guests who, it seems, never entirely left “The Jerry Springer Show,” we discover folks dressed as Ku Klux Klan members, tap-dancing as they sing, “Jews and blacks all go to hell/New York Democrats as well.” The number is an obvious homage to Mel Brooks’s “Springtime for Hitler,” from “The Producers,” but it’s impossible not to see, amid all the strenuous “hilarity,” Jewish and black bodies hanging from trees. Although the musical originated fifteen years ago, there is no real historical space between the white-sheeted goons onstage and the horrors that went down in Charlottesville, Virginia, last year. Thomas and Lee have turned that kind of sickening hatred into a telenovela, spiked with easy targets and derisive laughter—by the many for the many.

The comedian Dave Chappelle brilliantly remarked that everything is funny until it happens to you. What happens when America happens to you? Although America made Daniel Alexander Jones, there are few stages that can contain him. One reason is that he’s taken on a role that can be viewed as historically dangerous: that of a black man impersonating a woman. (Richard Wright’s powerful 1961 short story “Man of All Work” tackles this bitter absurdity.) But Jones’s inspired creation, Jomama Jones, is no Tyler Perry’s Madea. Jones is an intellect, not a vulgarian, and Jomama is in part an homage to the transformative power of black style. An American pop star who decamped, Tina Turner-like, for Europe, Jomama resides in bucolic splendor, with carefully tended goats and grounds. From time to time, though, when she knows that her country is in trouble—like now—she returns to the States with her mid-Atlantic ac-

cent to spread diva dust and sparkle.

“Black Light,” billed as “a musical revival for turbulent times” (at Joe’s Pub), is a largely successful attempt to explain the unexplainable, including what it means to live without borders or jingoism. Walking through the audience to a small stage, where her excellent band and backup singers await, Jomama asks a series of questions:

What if I told you it’s going to be all right?  
What if I told you not yet?  
What if I told you there are trials ahead  
beyond your deepest fears?  
What if I told you you will fall down, down,  
down? . . .  
What if I told you you will be brave enough?  
What if I told you you are not alone?

The questions come from a real place, but they are perhaps posed too early in the ninety-minute spectacle, putting us on alert that what’s to come may be a form of entertainment through “enlightenment.” Jones’s view that art can serve as a form for healing makes it too easy to reduce his work to a kind of moral tale, in which everything can be gauged as right or wrong. Oscar Wilde, in his wonderful 1891 essay “The Decay of Lying,” wrote that George Washington’s chopping down the cherry tree and then admitting to it was one of the worst things that could have happened to America: now we feel compelled to tell the truth at the expense of art. It’s all well and good for Jones to call himself a “civic-minded” performance artist, but what we really want is for Jomama to get up there and show some ‘tude and pep.

Luckily, once she gets past her moralizing, that’s what she does: she gathers us into her spangled arms, where we shiver, giddily, and forget her feel-good ambassador-of-love moments. Her narcissism and her smarts are what keep her going, and it’s fun to watch her get carried away by her thoughts and by her exciting improvisations with the audience, during which Jones never breaks character. It’s at those times, when the mood in the room could go either way, that Jomama reaches her full height (aided, of course, by six-inch heels and an even taller pile of hair) and, playing off the fans, teases out so much of who Jones is and who she is because of him: male and female, black and “European,” at rest and restless, and resistant to all the slogans of this new America. ♦

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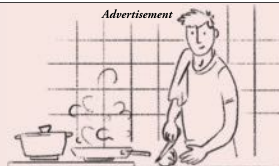
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## RANK AND FILE

*"Red Sparrow" and "Foxtrot."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

Silly foreign accents. Who needs 'em? If you are playing a Nazi in a Hollywood movie, say, you have three options. One, you speak German, and you are subtitled. Two, you speak in your normal tone, and your German identity is implied and understood. Then, there is the third and most common option, which defies all logic: you enter

purest unadulterated Connery, and nobody complained. What a shtar.

The old problem resurfaces, with world-class clunkiness, in Francis Lawrence's "Red Sparrow," which features, among other talents, Jeremy Irons, Charlotte Rampling, and Ciarán Hinds, each of whom is blessed with a voice of delectable resonance and depth. Sadly, all

try estate, with a drooping doctor and an elderly nurse who knits, prepare to be disappointed, for this Vanya belongs to the state security service. He thinks that Dominika would make an excellent sparrow—a professional seductress, trained to pitch her woo at malleable foes of the motherland. To this end, she is sent to a special school, where Matron (Rampling) gives frosty instruction in the carnal arts, while decrying the weakness of the West, which she describes as "drunk on shopping and social media." How unlike Russia, where everyone stays home, quite sober, writing letters in longhand and reading Pushkin.

The heroine is given a delicate task. She is to travel to Budapest, where she must meet and melt a C.I.A. agent, Nate Nash (Joel Edgerton), who is handling a Russian mole. Nate's bosses, however, alert to Dominika's game, order him to entrap *her*, so that she can be coaxed into spying for the Americans. The plot burrows this way and that, and the mole-work grows so frantic that the movie starts running out of lawn. By and large, I enjoy being gulled by narrative scheming, but in this case I soon gave up, since none of the characters has a fate worth bothering with. If you really crave secrets, try "Dishonored" (1931), in which Marlene Dietrich is offered a similar chance at espionage. Naturally, she accepts ("What appeals to me is the chance to serve my country"), and caresses the fur of her collar. She is already spying on herself. Her very smile is a twist.

Still, bewitching isn't everything, so what else can "Red Sparrow" entice us with? Thrills? Well, the nearest we get to a car chase comes in London, where Nate, driving a van, decides to take an exit ramp on his way to Heathrow Airport. Sex? With one Lawrence directing and another in the principal role, there was reason to pray that the loving, too, would be of Lawrentian strength. Sadly, the passion that flames between Dominika and Nate is doused within seconds, though he does bring her a nice cup of coffee in the morning. The rest of "Red Sparrow" is glum, protracted, and needlessly nasty, with two attempted rapes and a charming scene in which Nate, tied to a chair, has patches of skin shaved off like Parmesan. As for Jennifer Lawrence, she is one of those unfortunate stars, like Mark Wahlberg,



*Jennifer Lawrence plays an asset trained to seduce in Francis Lawrence's film.*

a weird catarrhal limbo that requires you to expectorate the words in English with a heavy Gothic croak. That might make sense if you were addressing your English-speaking enemy in his own tongue, but, no, you must maintain the habit even when talking to your fellow-Germans—or, as they would call themselves, *Tchermansz*, since they indulge in the same nonexistent patois. Who laid down this risible rule? And which actor has ever felt anything but discomfort when asked to obey it? Thank heaven for major players like Sean Connery, who are wise enough (and major enough) to treat it with disdain. As the captain of a Russian submarine in "The Hunt for Red October" (1990), he delivered his lines in

three of them play Russians, the result being that, when called upon to converse, they have to turn the Slavic dial up to eleven. And the result of *that* is that we stop listening to what is actually being said. The look on Irons's face toward the end, as he winds down with a cigar, a glass of brandy, and no dialogue, is one of hallowed relief.

The story, set in the present day, and adapted by Justin Haythe from the novel by Jason Matthews, tells of Dominika Egorova (Jennifer Lawrence), a prima ballerina with the Bolshoi, who becomes slightly less prima when another dancer lands on her shin. In search of an alternative career, she goes to her uncle Vanya (Matthias Schoenaerts). If you expect the rest of the film to be set on a coun-



whose crescent fame has made them less interesting to watch. She spends much of the new film looking blank and sculpted, and all the double-dealings lend her not a tincture of mystery. “Every human being is a puzzle of need,” we are told. Not this one.

At the start of “Foxtrot,” a woman faints. Her name is Dafna Feldman (Sarah Adler), and she has just been informed that her son Jonathan (Yonatan Shiray), a corporal in the Israeli Army, has been killed on active service. Soldiers are at her door, and we realize, with a shudder, how practiced they are at the breaking of bad news. One of them, syringe at the ready, kneels and gives Dafna an injection to sedate her. Another talks to her husband, Michael (Lior Ashkenazi), who says nothing and can barely move. The soldiers keep telling him to drink plenty of water, as if he were lost in a desert. They may have a point.

The director is Samuel Maoz, and he understands the hallucinatory force of grief—the way in which, all of a sudden, the tiniest details can seem strange, or strangely vital, to the living. A closeup shows the puncture mark on Dafna’s thigh, for instance, plus a Band-Aid that has peeled away from it, which Michael tries to stick back in place. Later, he holds his hand under a faucet, with the water steaming hot. Should this act be read as penitential, or is he testing himself for basic signs of life?

Meanwhile, the machinery of mourning grinds on. A gauche fellow from the military rabbinate shows up, suggests that “a little smile can help you cope,” and scuttles off, muttering, “May you

know no more grief.” As for Jonathan’s grandmother, snowy-haired and stern (“Tuck your shirt in,” she says to Michael), she suffers from dementia and fails to grasp the enormity of the loss. Then we get a surprise—too much to reveal here, but enough to prove that Maoz has no intention of cleaving to the tragic path. Still to come: dance numbers, camel gags, an unexpected burst of animation, and cans of potted meat bubbling like cauldrons over a naked flame. We also hear a scurrilous story, worthy of Philip Roth, about a Bible, treasured after the Holocaust as a family heirloom, which the teen-age Michael reportedly swapped for a porn magazine. Viewers may feel that they are caught in a cruel farce.

The structure is that of a triptych. From the Feldmans’ apartment, we jump back to the muddy middle of nowhere—a lonely checkpoint, guarded by Jonathan and three comrades in arms. Gradually, their living space, a large metal container, tips sideways into a mire, but little else disturbs their days, apart from the occasional Arabic-speaking citizens who drive up and ask to cross the barrier. One woman, resplendent in an evening gown, is made to stand in the drenching rain while the soldiers confirm her identity. Trained on every vehicle is a searchlight and, in case of emergency, a machine gun. In the words of a visiting superior, a balding bully who arrives by helicopter, “Shit happens.”

Not much of it happens, to be honest, in the third and final section of the tale. We return to Michael and Dafna, who giggle hopelessly as they share a joint in the kitchen. This mild coda has

stayed with me more than anything else in the movie; by now, we know something of the troubles that have, like *Furies*, pursued one generation after the next—the grandmother, her son, and her son’s son. “I remember thinking that I was going to be happy,” Dafna says, in one of the saddest lines in recent cinema. Some burdens are too heavy to be smoked away.

When it comes to the dramatizing of claustrophobia, Maoz is in his element. The whole of his previous feature, “Lebanon” (2009), was set inside an Israeli tank, and nobody could accuse his new work of roaming the open prairies. As the camera, perched on high, stares down at the stricken Michael, who is framed in a maze of geometric tiles, or inspects a row of soldiers in their bunks, the sense of confinement is overwhelming—if anything, too much so. Not a jot of randomness is allowed within the bounds of the movie, and everything is made to match; a splash of red paint on the wall of Jonathan’s bedroom, at home, prefigures the ragged hole in a wall through which the machine gun is aimed, as well as the bloodshed that it may yet unleash. Even the title is on double duty, referring both to the checkpoint’s call sign and to the faltering steps that Michael, when stoned, demonstrates to his wife. “No matter where you go, you always end up at the same starting point,” he explains. “Foxtrot” leads us a sorry dance, with irreproachable skill, but sometimes you long for it to break step, to quicken, and to breathe. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Christopher Weyant, must be received by Sunday, March 11th. The finalists in the February 26th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 26th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“That’s my wife you’re calling derivative.”*  
Joel Thomas, Moorpark, Calif.

*“Finally, something that speaks to me.”*  
Hayley Kurtz, Washington, D.C.

*“Well, you’re no masterpiece yourself.”*  
Miles Fowler, Charlottesville, Va.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“I can’t seat you until you are fully present.”*  
Sandra Miller, Arlington, Mass.





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